

THE Atlantic

JANUARY 2002 MONTHLY

The Hard Questions

**MUST THE UNITED STATES
REMAIN A SUPERPOWER?**

*by Benjamin Schwarz
and Christopher Layne*

**WHAT WENT WRONG WITH
MUSLIM CIVILIZATION?**

by Bernard Lewis

CAN WE KILL OSAMA'S IDEAS?

by Reuel Marc Gerecht

MUST WE TORTURE?

by Bruce Hoffman

IS SAFETY A PIPE DREAM?

by David Carr

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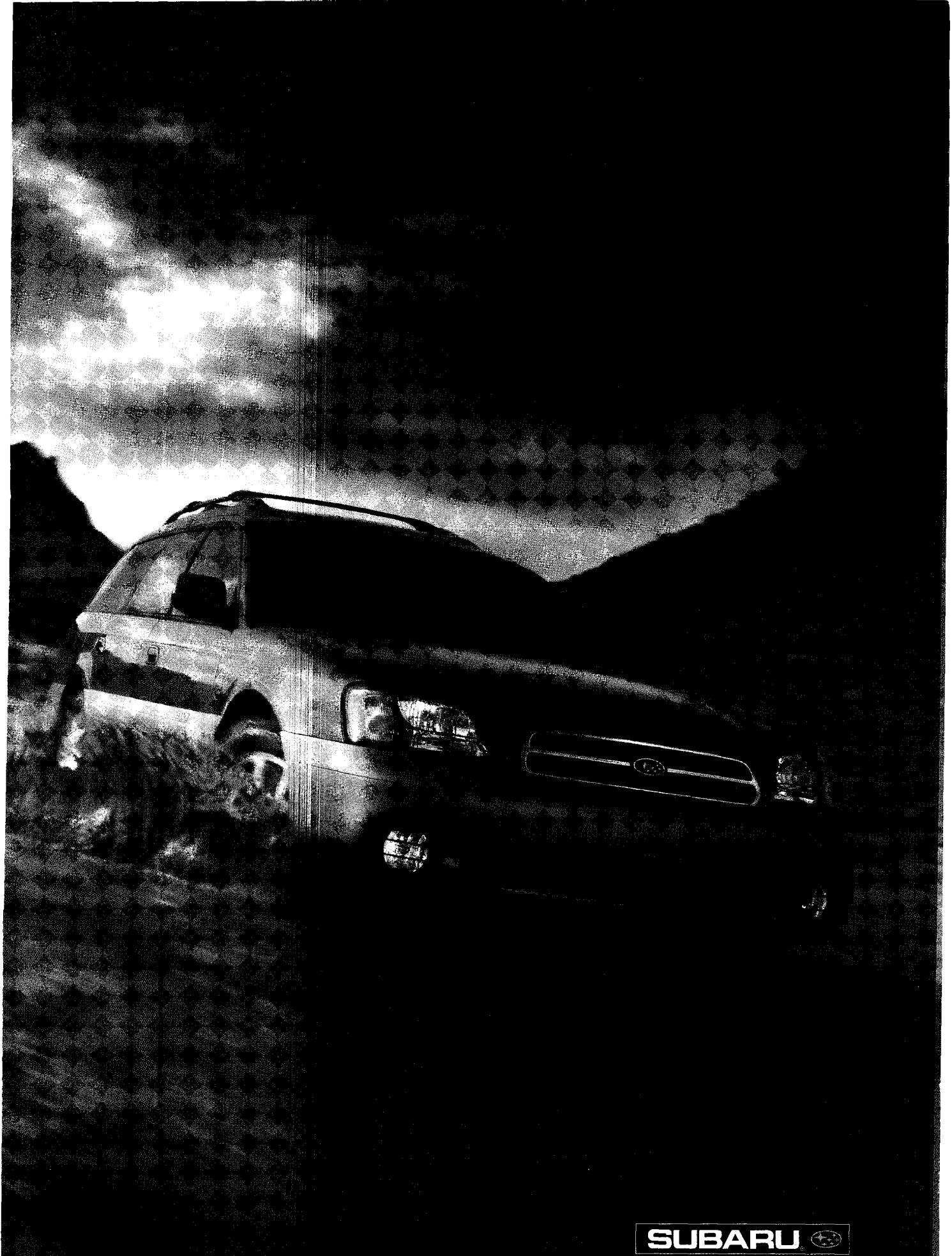
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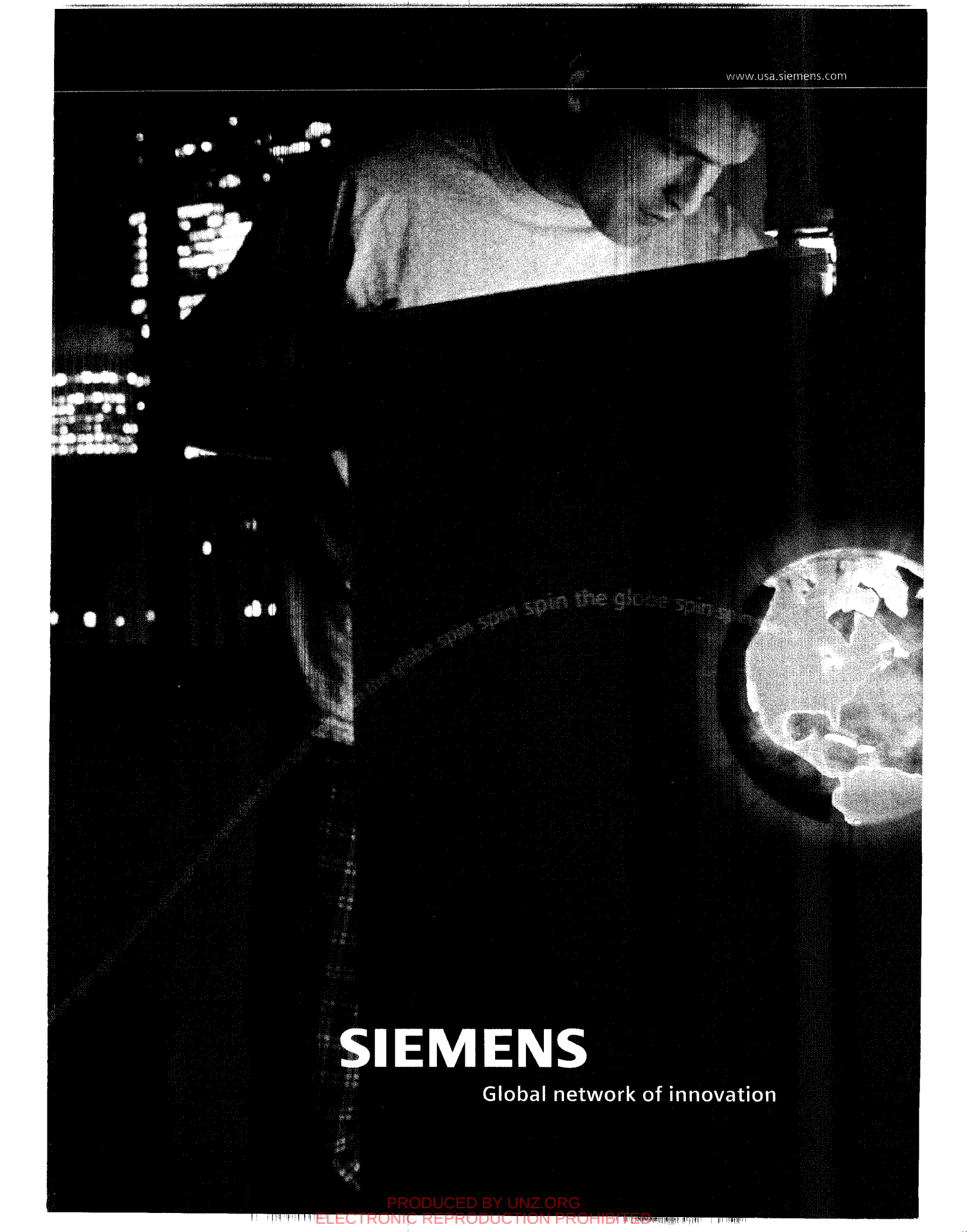
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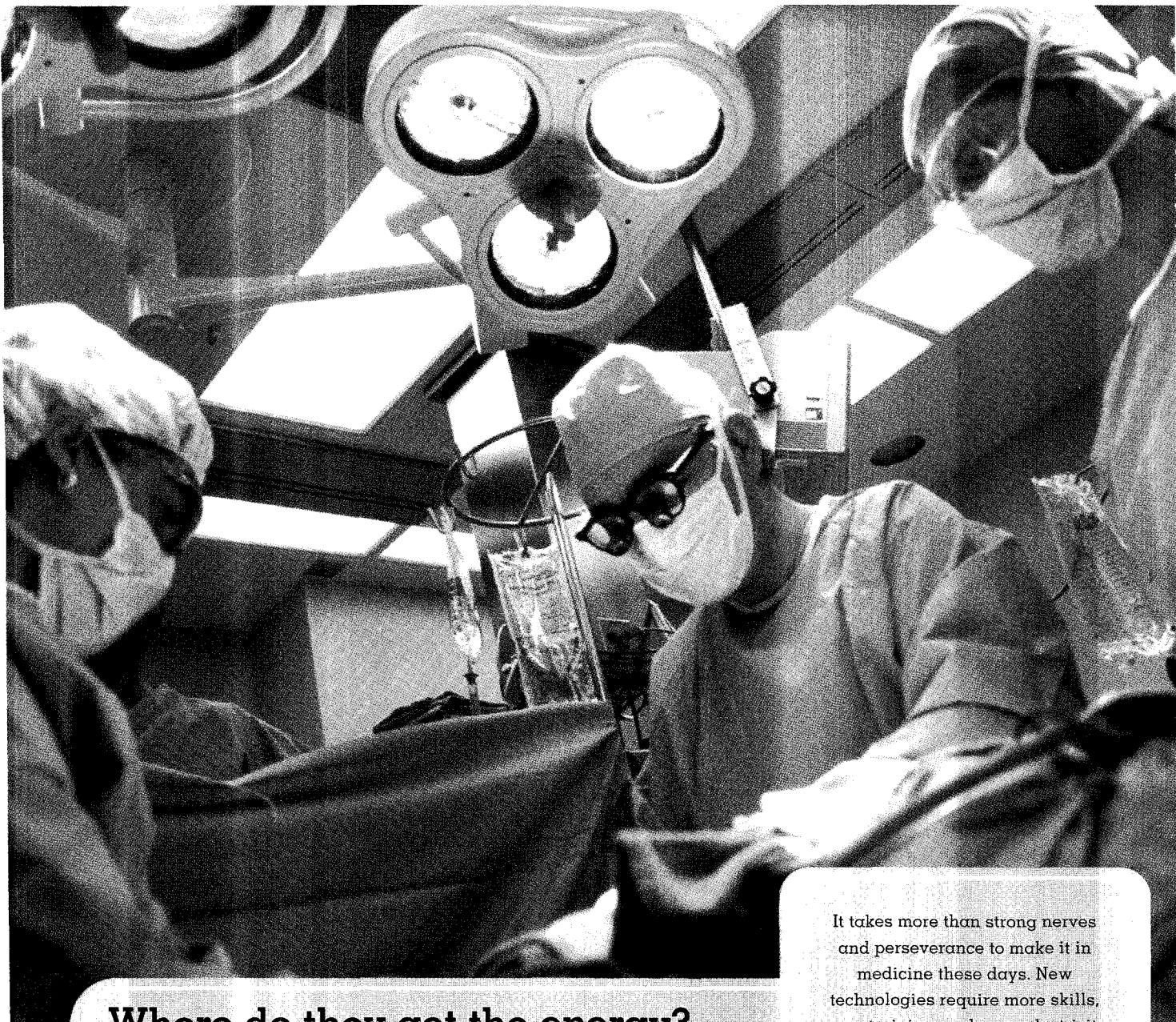
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THE Atlantic

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IN THIS ISSUE

Why has Muslim civilization fallen low by all the standards of the modern world? The distinguished scholar **Bernard Lewis** ("What Went Wrong?") suggests that part of the answer is sheer lack of freedom. Lewis is the Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies, Emeritus, at Princeton University, and the author of numerous books, including *The Arabs in History* (1950) and *Islam and the West* (1993). His article in this issue is drawn from a new book, *What Went Wrong?*, to be published this month by Oxford University Press.

Four articles examine the foreign and domestic challenges posed by the present crisis. **Benjamin Schwarz** and **Christopher Layne** ("A New Grand Strategy") urge the United States to allow Europe, Russia, China, and India to take the lead in policing their own neighborhoods. **Reuel Marc Gerecht** ("The Gospel According to Osama bin Laden"), an *Atlantic* correspondent and a former CIA officer, looks closely at bin Laden's rhetoric and discerns behind it a rational and calculating mind. **Bruce Hoffman** ("A Nasty Business"), a terrorism analyst at the Rand Corporation, reports on what the French experience in Algeria and the Sri Lankan experience with the Tamil Tigers tell us about the brutal measures that wars against terrorism entail. **David Carr** ("The Futility of 'Homeland Defense'") shows why trying to "Israelize" the United States is not only a practical impossibility but also counterproductive.

What does it mean to be a Roman Catholic nun? Her image "brings together three powerful elements: God, women, and sex." The novelist and memoirist **Mary Gordon** ("Women of God") describes her childhood fascination with nuns and explores the rapid decline and the continuing allure of their demanding way of life. Gordon's most

recent book is the Penguin Lives biography *Joan of Arc* (2000). She teaches writing at Barnard College.

At twenty-two, **Andy Bellin** ("Tells") left graduate school, where he was pursuing a master's in astronomy, to become a semi-pro poker player. His article in this issue is adapted from his book *Poker Nation: A High-Stakes, Low-Life Adventure into the Heart of a Gambling Country*, to be published in March by HarperCollins.

Robyn Joy Leff ("Burn Your Maps") has published fiction in *Quarterly West*. She lives in Los Angeles.

Ellen Bryant Voigt ("Three Poems") is the author of six volumes of poetry, including *Shadow of Heaven*, to be published next month.

This month in *The Agenda*: **David Brooks** considers the notion of "suburban greatness"; **Jonathan Rauch** explains the strange kinship between academia's postmodern left and Afghanistan's radical mullahs; Judge **Richard A. Posner** reflects that bad times are often good for perspective; **James Fallows** writes about the unintended consequences of every American war; and **Reed Hundt**, the former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and now a senior adviser to McKinsey & Company, explains what September 11 revealed about the strengths of the Internet.

In *Notes & Dispatches*: **P. J. O'Rourke** considers the absurdities of airport security and wonders what happened to common sense; **Jeffrey Tayler** reports from Moscow on why popular disapproval of Vladimir Putin's support for the fight against terrorism is nothing to worry about; **Geoffrey Wheatcroft**, in London, describes how a 1950s-style conservative came to lead Great Britain's

troubled opposition party; and **Eric Schlosser**, in New York, challenges McDonald's to use its corporate muscle to improve the conditions for workers in slaughterhouses.

A sojourn on the island of Santa Cruz offers visitors an especially rich experience of the Galápagos archipelago. **Edward J. Larson** ("At Anchor in the Galápagos"), a frequent visitor, is a professor of history and law at the University of Georgia and a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian whose most recent book is *Evolution's Workshop: God and Science on the Galápagos Islands* (2001).

Should a botanical garden delight us or enlighten us—or both? **Hatsy Shields** ("Plant Zoos") reports on a visit to the new National Botanic Garden of Wales.

Francis Davis ("Ready for Action"), a contributing editor of *The Atlantic*, mounts a defense of the tough-guy bravado and choreographed violence of action movies.

James Zug ("The Last Squash Tennis Player"), a senior writer at *Squash Magazine*, is at work on a book about the history of squash.

Philip Hensher ("Incomparable Naturalism") reviews Janet Malcolm's *Reading Chekhov*. The U.S. edition of Hensher's new novel, *The Mulberry Empire*, will be published later this year.

Refuge from the harshness of modern society can be found in the novelist Jan Karon's wildly (and improbably) successful Mitford series, writes **Martha Spaulding** ("The Land of Counterpane"), *The Atlantic's* deputy managing editor.

Cristina Nehring ("Mr. Goodbar Redux"), who teaches at the Université de Paris XIII, assays the dreary prescriptions of today's dating-advice manuals, which manage to turn pleasure into work.

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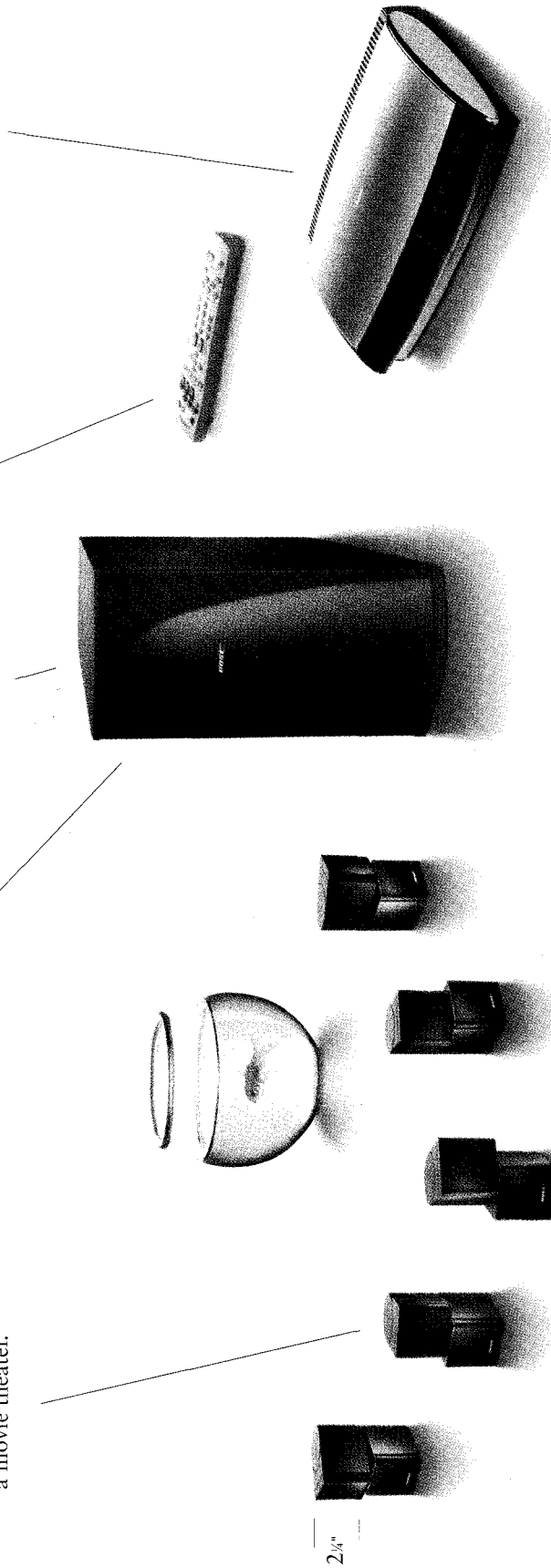
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This month on the Web . . .

Interview: Gerecht, a former CIA officer and a Middle East expert, discusses "Deconstructing Osama bin Laden," which appears in this issue, and "The Counterterrorist Myth" (July/August *Atlantic*), about the failure of U.S. intelligence agencies to make a dent in bin Laden's operations.

Fellow Columnist: *The Atlantic's* national correspondent engages the authors of new books on foreign affairs, politics, and technology—including Walter Russell Mead, the author of *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, and Michael Lewis, the author of *Next: The Future Just Happened*.

Interview: The *Boston Globe* columnist discusses his new book, *Gracefully Insane: The Rise and Fall of America's Premier Mental Hospital*. An excerpt, "The Mad Poets Society," ran in the July/August *Atlantic*.

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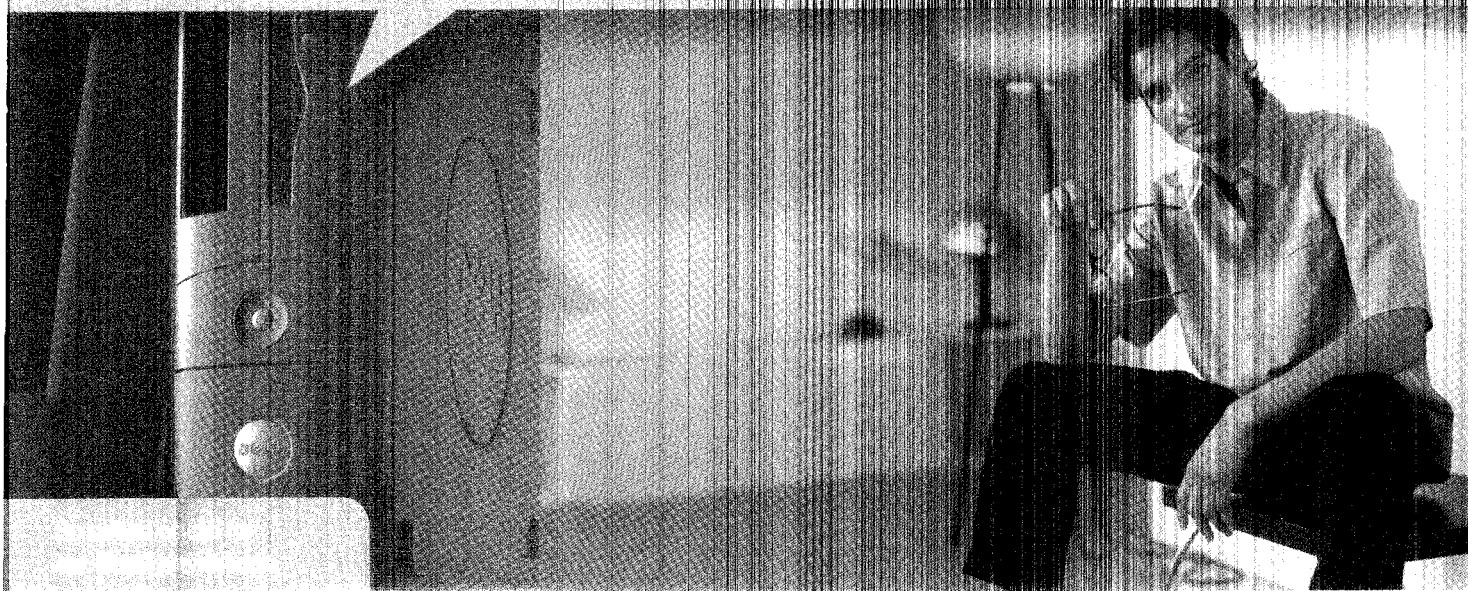
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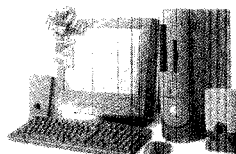
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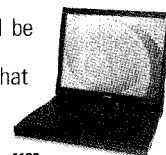


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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Peace Is Hell

My only disappointment with William Langewiesche's otherwise excellent article "Peace Is Hell" (October *Atlantic*) is that he did not discuss the disastrous ripple effect that our open-ended peacekeeping missions have had on the rest of the military. As a former U.S. Army officer, I have experienced those problems firsthand.

Throughout the 1990s deployments for operations other than war increased significantly even as the defense budget was cut and personnel were eliminated. Even units that did not deploy suffered from critical cuts in their operations and training budgets to pay for the operations of those that did. The result was a marked decrease in training and spare parts which left many of us unfit to perform wartime missions if necessary.

When I arrived in Germany, in early 1991, for my first assignment, I joined a unit that could count on going to the field for gunnery and maneuvers no fewer than four times a year, not including smaller training deployments. In my first year I spent nearly five months on various gunnery and maneuver training deployments. By the time I left the Army and my unit, in 1995, it had been more than two years since our last field deployment and we had dozens of vehicles sitting unused in our motor pool because we lacked the necessary parts to fix them. Peace was hell for all of us.

By the way, in the photograph on page 57 the vehicles parked in the motor pool are Bradley Fighting Vehicles, not tanks.

*Alan Smith
Converse, Texas*

William Langewiesche is surprised that sending 4,000 soldiers to Bosnia and sustaining them there could overburden the U.S. military. Indeed, in

relation to total Army size the numbers are fairly insignificant—but the numbers do not tell the whole story. Consider just the following two points.

First, since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent end of the Cold War, the U.S. military has consistently sought to maintain and even to expand its Cold War influence by volunteering armed forces for any role in the "new world order." As a result, the military has persuaded too many Americans with too little combat experience that the U.S. military is the only organization suited for any role remotely related to violence or the application of force. Yet that military is organized, educated, trained, and equipped to wage only the high-intensity wars of attrition that it was specifically designed to fight.

Second, peace operations are troubling to military professionals because they upend basic military principles. By their very nature peacekeeping operations demand operational, organizational, and even philosophical changes that are both difficult and disturbing for combat troops. Military professionals are taught that keeping the initiative is an essential operational principle. Peace operations not only foreclose the unfettered use of force but also expect the soldier to surrender the initiative at the outset. When peacekeepers interpose themselves between armed factions, they necessarily become reactive instead of proactive.

*David Isenberg
Arlington, Va.*

Perhaps the most striking fact reported by William Langewiesche is that the Department of Defense, with 1.4 million active-duty soldiers plus some two million reservists and civilians, "serves 41 million meals a year." Even if all those meals go to active-duty personnel, that works out to about thirty

meals per soldier per year, suggesting that the department has gone a long way toward resolving some of the logistical problems Langewiesche elsewhere describes. Here, at last, is an army that doesn't march on its stomach.

*Lyman G. Sandy
Albuquerque, N.M.*

William Langewiesche asserts that the U.S. Army in Bosnia has serious morale problems. Grumbling has been a soldier's right since there have been armies, and the truth of the matter is that unhappy soldiers vote with their feet. Simply put, they leave the Army when their term is up. This is clearly not the case in Bosnia. Army units there routinely post the highest re-enlistment rates in the entire U.S. Department of Defense.

*Thomas W. Collins
Major, U.S. Army
Washington, D.C.*

The Editors reply:

The error in the photo caption pointed out by Alan Smith was ours, not William Langewiesche's; apologies all around.

According to the Department of Defense, 41 million is indeed the number of meals served annually; the vast majority of service members use their "basic allowance for subsistence" to buy food elsewhere.

JFK's First-Strike Plan

Fred Kaplan's account of John F. Kennedy's first-strike plan (October *Atlantic*) makes a valuable addition to public understanding of the quandaries of nuclear weaponry. Kaplan's piece was based largely on a recently declassified top-secret memorandum I wrote to General Maxwell Taylor, then the military adviser to the President, on September 5, 1961, a copy of which Kaplan was kind enough to send me. The article is in the main accurate, but

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it may leave your readers with the impression that I was *recommending* a nuclear strike in the Soviet Union. The document makes plain that I made no such recommendation; I asserted that we should *prepare* to execute such a strike by doing the appropriate planning. The point of the paper was to call to the attention of the President and of the top military commanders what could happen under then existing military plans should the President decide he was *forced* to the nuclear choice as the alternative to abandoning West Berlin. The consequence of such a choice would have been horrible beyond contemplation. Even with the kind of alternative plan that Harry Rowen and I had sketched (which was presented in the document), the result would have been horrible, though less so by several orders of magnitude. But it is clear that it was vital for the President to know that an alternative strike plan was possible.

*Carl Kayser
Cambridge, Mass.*

I find highly questionable Fred Kaplan's suggestion that John F. Kennedy learned that his major campaign issue—the missile gap between the Soviet Union and the United States—needed to be reconsidered only as a result of “startling news” in the summer of 1961 from William Kaufmann's study at Rand. During the summer of 1960, long before the election, President Eisenhower had arranged for Kennedy to receive a classified briefing based on U.S. intelligence, including the high-resolution reconnaissance-satellite photographs of the Soviet Union that appear to have startled Kaufmann. The photographs showed that the missile gap was, in fact, overwhelmingly in favor of the United States: their eight ICBMs against our hundreds. That Kennedy continued to use the issue, despite having learned the truth from Eisenhower, made Ike believe that Kennedy was dishonest and damaged the relationship between the two men, though Kennedy continued to call on Ike for advice until his assassination.

*Gordon Louttit
Manhattan Beach, Calif.*

Ethiopia and the IMF

We are in no position to judge Joseph Stiglitz's private conversations. But being very close to the authorities in Ethiopia, I know that they were as surprised as I was by some of the views in his article (“Thanks for Nothing,” October *Atlantic*). We at the International Monetary Fund welcome constructive criticism, and we have great respect for Mr. Stiglitz, especially for the work that brought him his Nobel Prize in economics. But his country-specific policy discussions too often degenerate into misdirected and *ad hominem* attacks—for example, the insinuation that the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was caused by the termination of an IMF-supported program.

Mr. Stiglitz should have known, in the context of his previous responsibilities, that the IMF's program with Ethiopia was not interrupted in 1997 for the reasons he claims. The decision was made mainly because of the failure to meet key program objectives, as manifested in the government's excessive borrowing from the domestic banking system. This borrowing was squeezing private-sector activity.

The current program in Ethiopia, supported by the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility arrangement, is strongly grounded in the Ethiopian authorities' own poverty-reduction strategy, which reflects contributions from civil society in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's implementation of this program has so far been very successful, with real GDP growth reaching eight percent in fiscal year 2000–2001. We commend the Ethiopian authorities for this achievement.

*G. E. Gondwe
Director, African Department
International Monetary Fund
Washington, D.C.*

Joseph Stiglitz replies:

I am glad to know we all share a concern for Ethiopia's well-being, and G. E. Gondwe is right to commend the Ethiopian authorities for their good work in managing the country's economy. But as far as I can tell, Gondwe's letter actually backs up my article. The point I was making was that IMF officials did not judge Ethiopia on the basis

of its overall macro-economic performance—on its results on unemployment, inflation, or GDP growth, or even on the soundness of its overall budgetary stance. On these grounds Ethiopia deserved an A+. The program should not have been suspended because it failed to meet one of the numerous arbitrary targets that the IMF imposes on a country, including what the IMF termed “government's excessive borrowing from the domestic banking system.” If this so-called excessive borrowing really was a problem, why didn't it show up in the economy's excellent macro-economic performance? The IMF failed to make a convincing case that this target and the peculiar budgetary target that excluded foreign assistance were essential to sound performance, and for a reason that was obvious to me and to other experts on Ethiopia's economy: they weren't essential.

Confessions

“Confessions of a Prep School College Counselor” (September *Atlantic*), the excellent article by Caitlin Flanagan, missed one sorry fact—academics alone aren't enough.

At one very prestigious university the director of admissions told a group of parents of gifted students that even if an applicant were Einstein reincarnate, he or she would have to have a transcript showing community service, sports, and other community and school activities. Is it any wonder that average students and their parents become frantic? A truism of behavior modification is that a rat, a student, or a parent—any individual—who doesn't know why he or she is rewarded or punished will become very anxious. In the search for a well-rounded student body one minority has thus been slighted—those who want only to study or do research.

*Peter N. Munsing
Wyomissing, Pa.*

Caitlin Flanagan replies:

Once again a director of admissions at a “very prestigious university” gets it wrong: Einstein would not make a poor candidate for a spot at such an institution because he lacked ability on the volleyball court. It would be because of his poor grades in geography, languages, and history, because of the interlude he spent as a high school dropout,

and because of the insufficient scores he received on his first set of university entrance exams. Everyone knows that the majority of America's scary-smart kids are congregated at the second-tier schools, and they tend to have the last laugh. Poor Albert, after all, might not have qualified for a spot in Princeton's freshman class, but his legacy is more intrinsically connected to that magical corner of New Jersey than are the legacies of any number of squash-playing dingdongs who sailed in on early admission.

Help Wanted

Daniel Goldin's argument ("Help Wanted," September *Atlantic*) that the loss of the *Mars Climate Orbiter* and the *Mars Polar Lander* was due to a lack of experienced engineers is specious. The Apollo mission was carried out by a group of engineers who were largely under thirty and had no prior Moon experience. If published reports are correct that the demise of the *Mars Polar Lander* was caused by an inconsistency in units used, a more basic problem is exposed. This is a failure of good engineering practice. I am sure that the people working on the project could have caught the error if they hadn't been distracted from engineering by other demands on their time.

The real problem here, especially in government laboratories, is that people responsible for overhead functions are driving the technical staff. Every one of those overhead people requires some slice of time from the engineers and scientists doing the work or else places constraints on them that need to be worked around. Each of those demands is small and can be justified, but the cumulative burden is overwhelming. Engineers and scientists are being asked to spend increasing amounts of their time and energy supporting ever increasing overhead staffs whose concerns with marketing, diversity, sexual harassment, accounting, and other functions are far removed from any real engineering work.

To his credit, Daniel Goldin has cut the NASA infrastructure and moved money into projects such as the Mars missions. But he still has not solved the real problem: making sure that engineers and scientists are able to do their jobs

correctly. Top high school students are better educated than ever before, but they are not being attracted to science and engineering, because the people doing it are demoralized.

Jeff Hylden
Washington, D.C.

Daniel Goldin's appeal for NASA may fall on deaf ears, because NASA has not articulated any long-term goals or visions of where it wants to go. Like its aging shuttles, NASA is locked in low-Earth orbit. The only difference between John Glenn's 1962 flight and his 1998 flight was the availability of a space toilet on his second trip. NASA had a roomy, functional space station in the 1970s. Now, a quarter of a century later, it is building another one, piecemeal, as if with a giant Erector Set. NASA officials occasionally talk about a three-year mission to explore Mars, but the talk seems pointless when the agency lacks the machines and personnel to make a three-day trip to the Moon. Unless NASA can develop some exciting long-term goals to attract the kind of people it had four decades ago, it risks the fate of all things in low-Earth orbit: continued decay and a fiery demise.

Edward McSweeney
Crofton, Md.

Daniel Goldin expresses concern that "we are losing talented young people from an industry critical to our global competitiveness and national defense." As he says, "These problems, of course, are not confined to NASA."

Major corporations, which employ a large fraction of the nation's scientists and engineers, are also losing talented young people. A decade of restructurings, downsizings, and hiring freezes has resulted in an aging of the technical work force. As necessary as some of these changes may have been to create more-competitive corporations, they have led many scientists and engineers to feel that their contributions are not appreciated.

Another thing driving young people from the field is the complexity of modern technology, which makes it more difficult for do-it-yourself home experimenters to experience the joys of discovery. A youngster of today cannot repair a neighbor's radio, containing integrated

circuits, the way young Richard Feynman could repair radios containing discrete components. Similar observations could be made about automobiles and many other mechanical devices that in older forms launched youthful tinkerers into technical careers. Computers do not appear to have played the same inspirational role; one can write a great many Web pages without knowing anything of science or mathematics. Life and earth sciences attract curious youngsters, as they have for generations, and are as accessible as ever. I'm not surprised that the number of people choosing careers in computer, earth, and life sciences has expanded, while the number choosing the physical sciences, mathematics, and engineering has declined.

K. G. Hellyar
Rochester, N.Y.

Advice & Consent

I am writing to clarify a passage in "The Curse of the Sevso Silver," by Peter Landesman (November *Atlantic*). In describing the Sevso-silver trial before Justice Beatrice Shainswit in the New York State Supreme Court, the article states that Lord Northampton sued his lawyers after the trial and obtained almost \$40 million in an out-of-court settlement.

This statement may leave the reader with an inaccurate impression of who was sued and why. It is important to note that as lead counsel in that trial, Dewey Ballantine won a jury verdict leaving Lord Northampton in possession of the silver, and that the verdict was affirmed on appeal. Lord Northampton was quite pleased with the result and with Dewey Ballantine's representation.

However, Lord Northampton did sue the firm of Allen & Overy, the English solicitors who had originally advised him on the acquisition of the treasure. A reader could conclude from the wording in your article that the firm that represented Lord Northampton in the New York State Supreme Court was the firm he sued, which was not the case.

I appreciate the opportunity to clarify this point.

Harvey Kurzweil
Dewey Ballantine LLP
New York, N.Y.

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to get you where you're going.



*Captain Finnel
Chicago, IL*



*David H. Bugen, CFP
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INNOCENT BYSTANDER

by CULLEN MURPHY

THE GOLD STANDARD

The quest for the Holy Grail of equivalence

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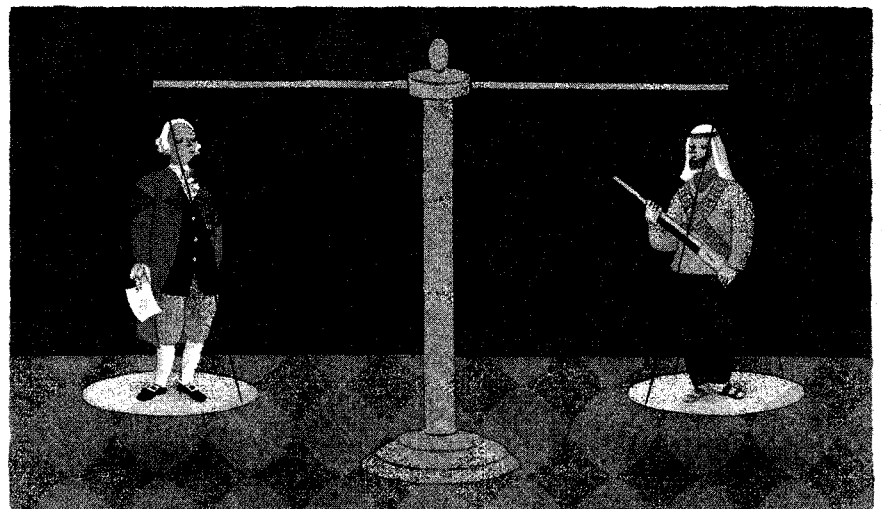
Last fall, as the United States began its military assault against targets in Afghanistan, it also sought to help some of that country's starving people by dropping hundreds of tons of food in the form of yellow-plastic packages known as HDRs, or "humanitarian daily rations." The packages bore a big image of an American flag and a small image of a man with a spoon. Further explanation was provided in English, Spanish, and French, but not in any of the Afghan languages, and some critics therefore derided the effort. My own inclination was to cut the military some slack. The contents of an HDR may be easy enough to explain to Americans, who have experienced firsthand the long evolution from canned soup to space ice cream. For Afghans, a translation of "ready-to-eat thermostabilized entrees" into Pashtu or Dari might not have proved all that helpful.

The modern world, in which cultures advance and mutate at varying rates, even as populations mix more readily than ever, has made matters relating to translation increasingly problematic. Sacagawea (who spoke only Hidatsa and Shoshone), together with sign language, took Lewis and Clark across half of North America and through numerous tribal systems. Today perhaps forty languages are spoken in central Ohio alone; police officers in Columbus carry "language identifier booklets" to figure out which one they are dealing with. The United Nations employs some of the world's most accomplished translators, but differences in conceptual hard-wiring often make translation nearly impossible. A few years ago, at a UN conference in Cairo, delegates faced the issue of how to translate "women's empowerment"—a mushy

term in English, hinting at everything and promising nothing, which raises alarming cultural issues when imported into Arabic, Russian, or Chinese. Last spring, when the fate of an American plane and its crew held in China became the Bush Administration's first foreign-policy test, diplomats spent a week working out the precise calibration of consternation to be used in English and Chinese to express official American feelings. Would it be *dao qian*, which means "really, really sorry"; or *bao qian*, which carries a more neutral sense of "regret"; or *yihan*, which means, in essence, "wish it hadn't happened"? The United States eventually sent a letter us-

the future will need only a microscope in order to read it. Some things, of course, the Rosetta Disk will be unable to explain—such as why, in the French version of the movie *10 Things I Hate About You*, a character says "Leonardo DiCaprio" instead of the original "Jared Leto."

The need for some sort of equivalence across cultures goes far beyond language. International trade became possible only when merchants came up with the idea of exchange rates. A Mesopotamian text from around 1800 B.C. states, "They had given to us 5,532 $\frac{2}{3}$ minas of copper according to the standard of



ing the English words "very sorry," which the Chinese translated as *shenbiao qianyi* ("a deep expression of apology or regret").

If this sort of thing is already difficult, imagine the challenge a millennium hence, when paleolinguists try to ken the subtleties of languages that will have become unrecognizable. To help them out, a group in San Francisco called the Long Now Foundation has begun creating what it calls the Rosetta Disk. The disk will contain the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis in a thousand languages, in tiny letters etched by ion beams on a small nickel plate. People of

Dilmun. Its weight is in total 611 talents 6 $\frac{2}{3}$ minas according to the standard of Ur." A recent study in the journal *Nature* reveals that rules of thumb for translating one system of economic value into another were well established as early as the Bronze Age in a broad swath from North Africa to India. It's a lot easier, of course, if everyone simply uses the same system. Most currencies used to be pegged to the price of gold; the United States abandoned the last remnants of the gold standard in 1971. This month, after a complicated deployment involving thousands of armored cars, bank notes

GREG CLARKE

denominated in euros will become the official currency in twelve European countries. By the end of February the old money in those twelve countries will be worthless in stores.

Although obsolete in economics, the idea of a gold standard in other areas remains powerfully seductive—the Holy Grail of equivalence. Grade inflation is occurring everywhere, but at variable rates; grade comparisons are difficult. A student's class rank is often a more useful measure of relative achievement, but not all schools provide it. The Law School Admissions Council (the organization that administers the LSAT) has devised one way around the problem. Recognizing that absolute grade-point averages differ in value, it has plotted the historical distribution of GPAs for all students from a particular school who take the LSAT; it can then determine where the GPA of any given applicant would fall within this distribution, thus yielding an approximation of class rank. Presumably, it ought to be possible to go even further, by correlating the grade-point averages of applicants from particular colleges or universities with the average law-board scores of applicants from those institutions. Students with A averages from one college might have an average LSAT score of 160, say, whereas that same score might be typical of B students from some other college. In effect, the LSAT determines the exchange rate for many local currencies.

The quest for a gold standard leads in many directions. Some years ago a social scientist named Ralph C.H. Siu introduced the concept of the "dukha," from the Pali word for "suffering," as the basic unit of discomfort, much as the calorie is the basic unit of heat. The columnist Michael M. Thomas has proposed the concept of a "gergen"—for the commentator David Gergen—as the basic unit of political-talk-show blather. For Americans, the basic unit of comparative world geography seems to be "New Jersey"; thus Swaziland is "about the size of New Jersey" (*The New York Times*) and the Netherlands is "about twice the size of New Jersey" (*The Washington Post*). Teams at MIT and Caltech, I'm told, are closing in on the basic units of boredom, fanaticism, hypocrisy, and fame.

Besides the practical reasons for seeking equivalence, there's a psychic need to establish a frame of reference. Almost everyone, upon hearing the age of a dog, mentally translates the dog's age into "dog years." After the publication of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, Tom Wolfe was hailed as the American Zola. Stanford University is sometimes called "the Harvard of the West." (In Ann Arbor you can buy T-shirts that say HARVARD: THE MICHIGAN OF THE EAST.) Stockholm, with its canals, is said to be "the Venice of the North." In Dublin, I used to watch a talk-show host named Gay Byrne, "the Johnny Carson of Ireland." A literary scholar from the Baltic region once told me about a writer he regarded as "the Estonian Mark Twain." Is there an Uzbek Jay McInerney? A Zambian Donny Osmond? A Libyan Norman Rockwell? I hope so.

Of course, not everyone agrees on what is equivalent to what. In conducting the 2000 census the government decided that for the purposes of "ancestry code" it would consider Assyrians to be equivalent to Chaldeans. Whoops! Members of both groups were upset, and the Assyrians smote the Census Bureau with a lawsuit. Opinion becomes even more diffuse when the equivalence under discussion is of the moral kind. William James coined the phrase "the moral equivalent of war" in a famous lecture (at the Harvard of the West) in 1906, urging Americans to pursue national service instead of militarism. Last summer the *Los Angeles Times* characterized a proposed Pentagon fight against waste in the armed services as itself constituting a "moral equivalent of war." Ronald Reagan, welcoming Afghan *mujahideen* to the White House in 1985, referred to his guests as "the moral equivalent of America's Founding Fathers."

So, yes, the quest for equivalence can go awry. But in its most ordinary form it touches some piece of truth, and recognizes some piece of common ground. Not long ago my wife needed certain repairs made to her office, so she brought in a couple of carpenters. Hanging on her wall is an old photograph of Rome, dominated by the dome of St. Peter's. As she left the office, she saw one of the carpenters point to the dome. He said to his partner, "Michelangelo was the general contractor on that project." ■



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THE AGENDA

A RENAISSANCE OF LIBERALISM

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I haven't checked, but I would bet that the release of the first Harry Potter movie, last November, was declared by someone to be epochal. Epochal stuff has been happening like crazy for years. We live in an epochal epoch, we are frequently reminded. It is hard to say exactly when the monumentalization of the trivial became a way of life in America. It may have been when the National Football League started according contests between large men in skintight pants the sort of solemn designations formerly reserved for armed global conflicts. This year it's Super Bowl XXXVI; that's a lot of epics, a lot of epochs.

Maybe the blame belongs, as it often does, with the Boomers—everything they did, or thought, or merely lived through was epochal. The Summer of Love was epochal, Woodstock was epochal, the Pill was epochal, long hair was epochal. Once you start getting epochal about hairdos, you are on a slippery slope. In the seventies and eighties things got completely out of hand. *Saturday Night Fever* was epochal; *Saturday Night Live*, too. Last Thanksgiving, Mick Jagger seemed to be easing into Perry Como's slippers with his own holiday special, "Being Mick"—epochal as parody.

In politics and in policy everything was epochal. This made sense at first. The Civil Rights Act really was epochal, and so was the Vietnam War, and so were the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and of Martin Luther King Jr., the riots on the campuses and in the inner cities, the destruction of the Democratic Party in Chicago, the implosion of New York City, Watergate. But the slope was slippery here, too. Ronald Reagan's supporters declared an epoch before he

had even been sworn in. What we had here was not just a new President, it was the Reagan Revolution—the right's answer to JFK's Camelot, that primal example of manufactured epochalism. When Bill Clinton became the first Boomer President, for a while there you couldn't pick up the newspaper without getting smacked in the eye by another Boomer-written article marveling over the epochal nature of it all.

Newt Gingrich was the living end of the political as epochal. He thought and spoke—and spoke, and spoke—

exclusively in epochs. Not long after he won the congressional battles of 1994, I covered a conference on the future (or, rather, *The Future*) in Washington, D.C. Gingrich was the big draw, upstaging the Tofflers, of *Future Shock* fame. He had a sort of unified theory of epochal relativity, whereby everything that was happening right now (very much including the rise of *The Indispensable Newt*) fitted into the great story of the ages of man. We in the press balcony dutifully recorded this for posterity. I guess you had to be there.

The genuine epochal events of the sixties were all disasters, and together they gave rise to a declinist and even apocalyptic view of America that would prevail in the politics of the far left and the far right. Progress under democracy was not inevitable; government was not necessarily a force for good and we ourselves were not necessarily good; our leaders were not necessarily competent or honest or even sane.

This view began losing ground in the nineties. The Gulf War, the collapse of the Soviet empire, the spectacular worldwide increase in wealth, the equally spectacular decline, at least in the in-

dustrialized world, of pollution—these were not disasters but the contrary. This accumulation of triumphs undercut declinism. Also undercutting it, in the United States and Great Britain, was the rise to power of a new generation of political leaders who practiced a form of activist government that was more about what worked than about what was ideologically prescribed.

On the national level in America this was represented by the Clinton Administration, which in some ways failed, but which did at least restore to respectability the idea of a government animated by the idea of improvement through government. And the Clinton effect nationally was a lagging indicator of change, following the effect locally of the works of pragmatic reformist governors such as Tommy Thompson, of Wisconsin, and George Voinovich, of Ohio, and mayors such as Rudy Giuliani, of New York, and Richard Daley, of Chicago. Millions of people relearned that states and cities were not ungovernable, that authority could in concrete ways make life better.

September 11 was epochal, and a disaster. The historian David McCullough has called it the worst day in the nation's history, and that is not saying too much. But the response to this disaster has been anything but disastrous, and this has greatly spurred the process of rebutting declinism which was already in train. One great effect, I think, will be a renaissance of liberalism, in the old, best sense.

Liberalism can scarcely exist without faith in government, and liberalism thrived in the long years of New Deal politics because most people had faith in government. Faith was rational. Had not government won the war, ended the Depression, built the highways, brought electricity to the farmlands, vanquished the economic terror of old age? Government did great things for all of us.

This sentiment, which seemed im-

COMMENT

MICHAEL KELLY

possibly archaic before September 11, has returned in force. A Gallup survey in early November found that 89 percent of respondents approved of the way President Bush was handling the war on terrorism, and 77 percent approved of the job Congress—Congress!—was doing. In fact, the survey found only one major American institution that was widely disrespected. Fifty-four percent of respondents disapproved of the media's performance. For some thirty years after Vietnam and Watergate it was widely assumed that in judging conflicting accounts, the reporter should be believed, not the general or the press secretary. That is no longer so. When people generally believe in their government, then activist government is once again possible.

A second reason for a resurgence of liberalism is the post-September marginalization of what had been since the late 1960s the dominant voice of left-liberal politics—the anti-government, anti-American-culture left of the perpetual protest. This marginalization is not just a matter of disapproval from outside; that has existed for years. More important, it is a matter of a split within. The left is dividing, and on one side of the divide is a majority that sees America as basically a good country and is serious about a liberal approach to making it even better. The patriotic left (the left of Woody Guthrie, not of Oliver Stone) is returning to the mainstream. When liberalism has been associated with scorn for the country, the country has scorned it; when it has been associated with a passion for bettering the country, the country has embraced it. This could happen again.

A third reason is a change in the dynamic on the right. Liberals like to think of conservatives as living in two camps: a country-club camp that is interested exclusively in the preservation of its own privileged status, and a red-neck Bible-class camp that is concerned chiefly with stamping out sin and keeping down minorities. There is still some truth to these old caricatures, but much less than there used to be. The religious-right wing of conservatism, in frustration at losing the cultural wars, has mostly retreated from practical politics. Country-club, do-nothing conservatism really ended with the election

of the anti-establishment Reagan. For years the dominating sentiment in mainstream conservative intellectualism has been about fashioning a conservative approach to addressing the nation's social ills and issues—compassionate conservatism, some call it.

September 11 will advance this process. What was left of the power of the intolerant right died when Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson agreed on TV that the attacks were God's just punishment for America's sins. What is

left of country-club conservatism aspires to not pick fights in a climate where the idea of working-class heroes has a sudden new currency. It will be instructive to see what happens in Congress the next time an increase in the minimum wage is proposed. Bush's philosophy regarding the domestic role of conservative government is now the only significant view standing in the Republican Party. That philosophy is activist, desirous of progress in addressing social ills. Liberal, you might say.

ON THE PLAYING FIELDS OF SUBURBIA

.....

If you fly over Scottsdale, Arizona, and look down at the vast brown desert, here and there you see little ribbons of green fairways, with country-club communities clustered around them like reeds around ponds—tile-roofed McMansions with mouse-pad lawns and little blue dots where the backyard spas are. Along the nearby roadways you can see massive two-tier malls. In the front tier are strings of chain restaurants that, if they merged, could form Chili's Olive Garden Outback Cantina, serving enough chicken wings to fill a canyon. In the back tier a line of megastores stretches out like a parade of pachyderms: Target, PetSmart, OfficeMax, Lowe's, and Barnes & Noble. Cutting diagonally across the empty parking spaces in between are ninety-eight-pound women in aerobics outfits steering 4,000-pound SUVs (these days, the smaller the woman, the bigger the car). If a modern Pied Piper came down to round up all the kids, it would be called The Gathering of Ashleys, and hundreds of cheerful ten-year-old girls would pour out of the Gaps and Abercrombies and Wal-Marts, drawn by the piping of Britney Spears. They'd have their peach tank tops, their 2 Crrrls brand strawberry-scented spritz, and their pink backpacks, and they'd be led, mesmerized, to soccer practice.

As I looked down on this scene from the air, one question popped into my head: Is this nation really ready to

fight a war? From this vantage point America's culture seems better suited to produce *Temptation Island 2* contestants than soldiers who can withstand the rigors of combat. From up here we seem too affluent and comfortable to be tough-minded, too cosseted by our own peace and prosperity to endure conflict.

If one wonders about this sort of thing, it's helpful to consult the writing of the historian Victor Davis Hanson. In different guises Hanson comes down on both sides of the issue, and so is doubly illuminating.

Hanson is a Jeffersonian, contemptuous of much of the commercial American culture he sees around him. The suburban information-age man, he writes in his book *The Land Was Everything* (2000), lives in a world of dross—"video games, romance novels, plastic Santa Clauses, and three-pound bags of Snickers." He is a pampered and conforming creature who "depends on someone else for everything from his food to his safety."

Obsequiousness, rather than independence, is more likely to feed his family ... his entire ideology [is] no ideology at all other than the expectation of material surfeit and liberty to enjoy his gains as he sees fit.

Hanson believes that farmers and people who work with their hands are the ones who embody the virtues that make countries strong. They are independent and resilient, stewards of the land in times of peace and courageous

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when called to war. And Hanson matches word with deed. He lives in the same farmhouse that his family has lived in for five generations. He leads a life half cerebral (he founded the classics program at California State University at Fresno) and half muscular (he still works his farm, growing grapes, apricots, plums, and peaches, which drains his academic income and then some). Farming for him, as for most family farmers, is no easy task. He writes in *The Land Was Everything*,

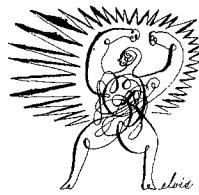
Agriculture, I think, will always be war. At the conflict's most dramatic, during an unseasonable storm or foreclosure warning, the agrarian fight becomes real bloodletting, a brutal, horrific, yet sometimes heroic experience.

Even in normal times there are struggles with weeds and pests, family squabbles, ruinous prices, developers, and sprawl. Hanson believes that the fundamental lessons in life are learned painfully, and that farming teaches that the land is permanent and individuals are temporary. Farming, he feels, inculcates a tragic view of life: bad things happen, and character is determined by how one accepts the hand of fate.

Reading Hanson the Jeffersonian, and observing how far the nation has traveled from the heroic, struggling life he celebrates, one may despair. But Hanson is also a military historian. He has noticed that Western constitutional democracies produce incredibly lethal armies. Though individualistic and loose, these democracies are able to defeat disciplined, fanatical, and even barbarous dictatorships. They can do this, Hanson argues, because they have inherited Greek ideas: Science should not be subservient to religion, so democracies are usually technologically superior to their enemies. Citizens are entitled to private property, so democracies tend to be capitalist, and thus richer. Dissent is encouraged, so war aims and strategies are honed through argument, and junior officers can improvise. People are equal, so countrymen feel that they are all in the fight together—hence they battle with greater loyalty to one another. Hanson has ex-

plored these themes in a series of books, *The Western Way of War* (1989), *The Soul of Battle* (1999), and *Carnage and Culture* (2001). He is proud of how America has responded to the war against terrorism, and confident that it will triumph.

I phoned Hanson and asked him to reconcile his optimism about the current war effort with his pessimism about the state of American culture. He explained that America's institutions remain strong even if its culture is growing weak. Much as I admire Hanson, I'm not sure I was persuaded, because, as he himself emphasizes in his books, war is really a test of a nation's civilization. And yet I sense that many people share both Hanson's anxiety and his confidence. America does seem at once crass and materialistic and strong and indomitable. The problem is that we have lost the ability to explain our strength to ourselves. In the eighteenth century it was easy to see how a nation of yeoman farmers could put aside their ploughs and fight for independence. Their rugged lives prepared them for the struggle. In the nineteenth century it was easy to see how a nation of hardy pioneers could slog through a brutal civil war and then propel the nation to global pre-eminence. Even in the twentieth century



it was easy to see how a population of tough factory hands and Depression-hardened workers could translate their survival skills to the battlefields of Europe. But what about now, in an age of mass affluence and office parks, an age in which so many people lead their lives in front of keyboards and video screens?

The comforting fact is that Americans have experienced this sort of cultural anxiety frequently in their history. When the agricultural economy gave way to the industrial economy, agrarians and pastoralists warned that the country was losing its soul. When Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out that the frontier was closed, cultural pessimists argued that the country was losing its pioneer vigor. And now, when brain power is replacing muscle power, we are anxious once again.

And yet America is still somehow strong enough to be the world's domi-

nant power. Our supposedly complacent suburban nation was able to endure, and win, a forty-year struggle with communism. Though we are fat and happy, our workers are still the most productive in the world. On average, we work 350 hours a year more than the Europeans, and longer hours than even the Japanese. Though we seem credit-card crazy, somehow there is little evidence that we are actually decadent. Crime rates have dropped dramatically over the past decade. Teenage pregnancy rates are down. Alcohol consumption is down.

The only plausible explanation, I think, is that suburban life is more arduous than it appears, and provides more character-building experiences than we imagine. Sure, there's less drudgery and backbreaking labor than there was in the past, but there's also far more uncertainty, and life is far more competitive. Almost nobody grows up today assuming that he will work in the same profession, or at the same plant, as his parents. Almost nobody grows up thinking that she will work for one paternalistic organization all her life. Eighty years ago a person who grew up in a wealthy WASP family had a reasonably secure status. A person who grew up black or in an ethnic neighborhood encountered certain limits to opportunity. Those limits have been reduced, and although the field is more open, the burden on the individual is much greater. The essence of an information economy is that knowledge is not inheritable; each generation has to earn success over again.

Today's Americans face the ordeals of the meritocracy. Last year I wrote a piece for this magazine titled "The Organization Kid," about elite college students. During the reporting of that piece I developed some doubt about the quality of moral instruction on campus, but nobody would doubt that today's young people lead arduous lives. Since grade school many of them have been hitting the books, mastering skills, chasing down growth experiences. They grapple with the effects of divorce and the temptations of a media world that offers them access to excess. Yet when they get to college, their work ethic blows

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELVIS SWIFT

away that of any previous generation.

Talking with people in suburbs across America, one finds that as a nation we feel that the most pressing scarcity in life is not of money but of time. Hanson's farmers have callused hands; today's suburbanites have color-coded charts on the refrigerator indicating where each kid has to be at each moment of the week. They live in an overcommunicated world; they have to be ruthless editors in the war for their attention. They are self-disciplined, too—this is surely the most abstemious moment in American history. (The yeoman farmers hit the moonshine, whereas caffeine, a stimulant, is the drug for our age.) Moreover, these suburbanites still find time to coach Little League teams, teach Sunday school, and take their kids hunting and fishing.

True, none of this meritocratic striving is proof of moral toughness. But as the Greeks taught us, good habits produce good virtues. I've been back on college campuses since September 11, and those striving kids are now having serious debates about the war effort. They were always morally earnest; now they're directing the determination they brought to their SAT prep courses to an examination of their life courses and the possibility of public service. Kids I met six months ago who had their eyes on investment-banking jobs are now suddenly thinking about careers in the CIA or the State Department.

America is perpetually on the brink of being corrupted by its own affluence—but only on the brink. We are less shallow than we appear. If you fly over Scottsdale, Arizona, you fly over homes owned by people who slogged their way through medical school and ER duty, or negotiated the booms and crashes of the high-tech industry, or handled a management team or a lifetime of divorce cases. They look stupid pattering around the fairways in their golf shorts, but they usually have something interesting to tell about their pasts. If we could understand how the lives they have lived have inculcated the virtues we admire, I think we would begin to appreciate that this nation has achieved a paradoxical and inexplicable condition: suburban greatness.

THE MULLAHS AND THE POSTMODERNISTS

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In October I got an e-mail from a historian I know who teaches at a college in the Northeast. She was gloomy about the terrorist attacks and anxious about the war, but much of her distress stemmed from the reactions of some of the people around her. One of her colleagues had appeared at a teach-in and declared that Americans were the "terrorists," because of their policies in Iraq. Others described the U.S. military action as naked aggression against an innocent, oppressed, and poor population. On another campus nearby she saw a graffito that read, "After Timothy McVeigh did we bomb Michigan?" Such sentiments cast their proponents into an incongruous ideological alliance—not with mainstream campus liberals like my professor friend (she was mystified and appalled) but with radical Muslims on the other side of the world.

There is nothing new about objections from the American left to the exertion of U.S. power abroad. Nor is there necessarily anything wrong with them: on more than one occasion they have been prescient. Yet this time the far left's reaction was strikingly reactionary. If the left seemed as anti-American as it was anti-terrorist, that was because it was in fact anti-everything, offering no program for American self-defense in the face of a direct attack and no substitute for either Western materialism or Islamic fundamentalism. The left failed to be constructive; it managed only to be, excuse the expression, deconstructive. That was disappointing to those who believe, as I do, that a vital and intelligent left wing is an important ingredient of a healthily self-critical society; but it was also clarifying, because it demonstrated the extent to which radical egalitarianism has displaced all other values on the postmodern left.

Radical egalitarianism? How could that explain the bizarre convergence of postmodern Marxists with anti-modern mullahs, who are anything but egalitarian? An underappreciated book by the late Aaron Wildavsky offers an answer.

Wildavsky taught at the University of California at Berkeley for thirty years, until his death, in 1993. He was one of the great political scientists of his generation. I was lucky to know him, and not a day passes when I don't miss his wisdom. That wisdom, infused with an incandescent passion, shines from a collection of essays titled *The Rise of Radical Egalitarianism* (1991).

Wildavsky wrote at the time when "political correctness" had only just burst into full flower on university campuses, and he wondered what lay behind it. He concluded that its many impulses—the impulse to regard all whites as oppressors and all minority members as victims, the impulse to see America as incorrigibly racist and classist and unfair, the impulse to impose admissions and hiring quotas and then lie about them, the impulse to politicize all academic disciplines, the impulse to snuff out dissent—were all aspects of a single controlling imperative. "That common factor," he contended, "is egalitarianism—the belief in the moral virtue of diminishing differences among people of varying incomes, genders, races, sexual preferences, and (especially) power."

Wildavsky got it right. Whereas not long ago the American left was multivalent, valuing freedom, for instance, no less than equality, it now values just one thing. That is what makes radical egalitarianism radical. Even "diversity" has come to mean centrally administered sameness, with portions allotted not to persons but to five or so standardized categories of person. The postmodern left has become as fixated on its one value as the anti-modern mullahs are on theirs.

Were he alive, Wildavsky would have no trouble understanding why two such seemingly opposed groups might join forces against the modern West. In an essay titled "Who Wants What and Why? A Cultural Theory" he sorted political and cultural preferences into three broad categories. Individualistic cultures, he wrote, believe that all

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RAUCH**

is right with the world when people are mainly self-regulating, with decisions made by bidding and bargaining, so that the need for centralized authority is reduced. Hierarchic cultures believe that all is right when each is in his proper place, with particular people or groups making sacrifices for the good of the whole. Egalitarian cultures believe that all is right when everybody's status is the same.

The relevance of Wildavsky's categories today is immediately evident. The American mainstream is predominantly individualistic. Postmodern leftists, in contrast, are radical-egalitarian to the core. With Marxism in ruins, they can offer no viable social system that will reliably produce equal outcomes; yet so fiercely do they burn with egalitarian zeal that they insist more stridently than ever on the unfairness and wickedness of capitalism and materialism. Thus their new turn toward nihilism—toward ideology and action that always protest but never propose, toward suggestions, as in Seattle, in the form of rocks hurled through plate-glass windows.

If the enemy of your enemy is your friend, then it is not so surprising that postmodern Marxists should make common cause with radical mullahs. Islamic fundamentalism is hierarchism incarnate: the world will be a just place when Islamic law is the only law, with Muslims ruling infidels, men ruling women, and God ruling man. Although the radical-Islamic and radical-egalitarian senses of justice could hardly be more different, they are less opposites than counterparts in opposition to the dominance of individualism. If they differ as to ends, they share a sense of grievance at having been humiliated by history and a desire to torment what they see as the smug societies of the West.

The Marxists and the mullahs are natural enemies, as Stalin and Hitler were, and their alliance, such as it is, will prove equally fleeting. But their convergence is as revelatory in today's context as the Hitler-Stalin pact was in 1939, and for much the same reason: it brings two usually opposing pole stars into temporary conjunction, and reminds the rest of us where we stand.

STRONG FIBER AFTER ALL

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Many of our most important judgments are relative. As Samuel Johnson said, "Of the first building that was raised, it might be with certainty determined that it was round or square, but whether it was spacious or lofty must have been referred to time," because "spacious" and "lofty" are relative terms. And similarly, if more enigmatically, T. S. Eliot said,

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it ... For order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, value of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted.

In other words, we respond to a shock to our belief system by trying to reweave our beliefs into a new coherence.

A spectacularly shocking event such as the terrorist attacks of September 11 alters "the relations, proportions, value" of our practices, institutions, attitudes, and historical understandings. We learn, for example, as I wrote in this magazine last month, that civil liberties, being relative rather than absolute, must diminish when the nation is seriously endangered. Not their core but their lush foliage, the product of many decades of expansive judicial interpretations of the Constitution, is a luxury of the safe society we thought we were. In 1989 the Supreme Court, in the name of the free-speech clause of the First Amendment, held that it is unconstitutional to punish a person for burning the American flag. The dissenting justices argued—an argument that failed to persuade most students of constitutional law (myself included)—that the flag is a unique national symbol that the government should be empowered to protect from desecration. This argument seems a great deal stronger today, for it turns out that the social importance of the flag, too, is relative to circumstances.

Privacy has just been revalued

downward, as airline passengers discover how little they value it relative to life and so positively welcome intrusive searches of their personal belongings. We also learn (though we actually knew this already) that religion is not all sweetness and light. It raises the stakes in a conflict, and it reduces deterrence, by holding out promises of afterlife rewards that may, to believers, deprive criminal sanctions of all their weight. Hobbes may well have been right that

the fear of death is the foundation of human society. The philosopher Richard Rorty has said that "a world of pragmatic atheists ... would be a better, happier world than our present one." Most Americans would disagree, but fewer than would have disagreed just months ago. We should be careful to define "religion" broadly, however. Devout communists worshipped History, and were willing to kill, and even to die, for it.

Before September 11 Jacques Barzun and other social conservatives were much given to hand-wringing over the decline of civility in American life. The vulgarity of television was regularly decried. The lyrics of popular music were denounced. Barzun even called ours a decadent era. His criticism of American culture extended to the phasing out of dress codes at work; the informal-dress movement—lawyers and investment bankers denuded of jacket and tie—struck him as an ominous portent of national decline. I don't think we'll hear much about the social significance of office dress codes until the nation again feels safe about going to the office. The danger from within shrinks in our minds when the danger from without is perceived as formidable. Cultural sickness pales in the face of medical epidemics. To paraphrase Samuel Johnson, before September 11 we may have known that formal dress was square; we could not have known, as we do now, that it was not lofty. There is much in modern American culture to offend the fastidious, and yet

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the nation's response to September 11 and its aftermath has indicated no weakening of the national fiber. The American character remains robust despite cultural changes that strike critics as revolutionary. Culture and morality will take care of themselves; physical safety and health require active defense.

American race relations, which a few months ago seemed the nation's most serious problem, now seem almost benign, and concerns about "lifestyle" trivial. We see that black Americans have the same basic values as white Americans, and homosexual Americans the same basic values as heterosexual Americans. The category "American" suddenly seems spacious and lofty, transcending the petty divisions that so preoccupied the politically active and the ideologically obsessed. We now can see the virtue in concepts such as "Americanism" and "nationalism." (There's nothing like a common enemy for making friends.) We discover that left-leaning communitarians, who decried the loss of community, overlooked the *American* community. We are learning that social diversity and social homogeneity, extreme individualism and national community, are compatible. And now that we perceive really serious dangers to life and health, shall we worry as much about ambient cigarette smoke and food additives as we used to?

Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* ends with the outbreak of World War I. All at once the fancy Swiss sanatoria that formed the novel's setting for those hundreds and hundreds of pages—the luxurious resorts for rich people which hosted feasts of talk and sex while pretending to treat often imaginary pulmonary ailments—empty out. The preoccupations of their denizens are recognized all at once as indescribably petty.

The United States was not a fool's paradise before September 11. But problems that loomed large when the nation was safe and rich are seen in a new, diminished, and quite possibly truer perspective. It is the right perspective when the nation is under siege and unillusioned.

WASHINGTON DESK

COUNCILS OF WAR

Every American war has changed our society in ways that were not anticipated. What will be the consequences of the latest war?

BY JAMES FALLOWS

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In November the author Geoffrey Perret forlornly wandered the talk-show circuit, finding that discussions of his new biography of John F. Kennedy, *Jack*, were being bumped by war news. It's a shame Perret couldn't have switched to promoting one of his earlier books, first published in 1989 and now out of print—*A Country Made by War*, to which the mobilization against al Qaeda gave a new and sudden significance. Along with *Special Providence* (2001), by Walter Russell Mead, it suggests what the government may start looking like as it moves through the first stages of the current war.

The theme connecting the two books is that the United States and foreign observers alike have badly misunderstood the way it conducts diplomacy with—and, when necessary, war against—the rest of the world. Mead says that U.S. political leaders are typically considered to be rubes in international dealings, certainly when compared with their suave Old World counterparts. The blame for this failing is usually placed on our cowboy heritage, the self-absorption of our politics, the limits of our education system and our media, and other factors that make for an insular and sometimes isolationist mentality.

It's all bunk, Mead says. Through the first fifty years of its history the American nation was more or less constantly at war, or negotiating to avoid war, with European powers; and throughout its history it has ambitiously and successfully advanced military, economic, and ideological interests around the globe. Its armed forces were active in North Africa, Latin America, and the South Pacific before Andrew Jackson became President. Marines landed in China and Liberia before the Civil War, and in Korea soon afterward. World War I, which meant either outright defeat or Pyrrhic

victory for every other major combatant, laid the foundations for American economic, diplomatic, and, eventually, military pre-eminence—a position that World War II cemented.

Europeans, Latin Americans, Third World leaders, the United Nations, may continually complain about the crudeness and insensitivity of U.S. policy. But its real offense, Mead concludes, is that it has worked so well. "Compared, in sum, with the dismal record of other great powers," he writes, "American foreign policy—with a handful of exceptions, most notably Vietnam—looks reasonably good." What has made America the Great Satan to radical Islam is precisely that it seems too strong.

A Country Made by War took another contrarian approach to America's military image. The United States likes to think of itself as Cincinnatus or as one of the original Minutemen, in Perret's view (or, to use a more recent image, like the Mel Gibson character in *The Patriot*). That is, we supposedly prefer the rural, peaceful virtues, and take up the sword only when the battle is brought to us—but once provoked, we fight like crazy so that we can return to the plough and the hearth. Every movie about Pearl Harbor incorporates this theme, and it is clearly how the war against al Qaeda and the Taliban began.

Perret argued at great length that preparing for war, waging war, and adjusting to war's aftermath have been not distractions but crucial organizing aspects of American life. Like natural disasters—meteorites, climate change—in biological evolution, war shakes things up. Seymour Melman, an economist who teaches industrial engineering at Columbia University, has for years made a similar-sounding argument about what he calls the "permanent war economy." But Melman views the military



influence as an explanation for America's problems; Perret said (to oversimplify) that it was a historic strength.

The list of economic changes made in the name of war is familiar. In some cases U.S. leaders have used military "requirements" as a convenient excuse for things they wanted to do anyway: Dwight Eisenhower called the interstate highway system the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways when he proposed it in the mid-1950s; a hundred and fifty years earlier Thomas Jefferson, though skeptical of centralized federal power, encouraged the establishment of West Point as a way of increasing the nation's supply of engineers. In many more cases war and the interwar military served as tools of national development and industrial policy. The settlers who went west moved into territory cleared of Native Americans by the U.S. cavalry, following maps charted by military surveyors. The domestic steel industry got a significant boost about a century ago from the Navy's determination to build an ironclad fleet. This tradition of industrial development extends to the Pentagon's invention and financing of the original Internet system, and the defense and space programs' nurturing of the semiconductor business.

America's politics and cultural life were also heavily influenced by war. An unintended consequence of the U.S. entry into World War I, for example, was four decades of closed-door immigration policies. Many of the Italian, Greek, Polish, and Jewish immigrants whose families had been arriving in huge numbers before the war scored below normal on intelligence tests, which were first widely used on recruits for the war. Those results were, of course, skewed by the lack of English vocabulary in people who were often new to the language. But the findings played a major part in passing laws in the 1920s that effectively barred legal immigration from places other than Western Europe. And World War II, with its sudden and sweeping technologies and cultural leaps, is widely considered to be the event that made America modern.



Vietnam, with its heavy casualties and bitterly divisive effects on American society, led to the emphasis of the "Powell doctrine" on avoiding engagement when there is any risk of being trapped. Something similar had happened before, Perret reminded me when I spoke with him recently. "After the terrible losses in the Civil War, the Spanish-American War was fought as if it had to be won with really small casualties," he said. "And American losses were negligible in Cuba and the Philippines."

No one knows how long this new war will last, or how much like a "real" war it will turn out to be. But even small and inconclusive wars, as our conversation made clear, have had their effect—on military doctrine, on government institutions, on Americans' sense of their rights and identities. And one can already see the first signs of what some of the lasting effects may be—or at least where to watch for them.

Through the late fall the Bush Administration was necessarily tied up with fast-breaking wartime demands. But in November, in the second and less heralded of his major televised addresses before a live audience, President Bush gave some indications of the longer-term implications of this war. The first speech, on September 20, laid out a rationale for a sustained fight not against Islam but against terrorists and states sympathetic to them. The second, given in Atlanta on November 8, seemed a diminished version of the first. It was treated as unimportant by the broadcast TV networks, only one of which (ABC) carried it live.

Still, what the President said, between the formulaic applause-line thanks at the beginning and the incongruously punchy slogan ("My fellow Americans, let's roll!") at the end, was significant. Without labeling them as such, he identified the most difficult issues his administration was trying to balance: learning patience for a potentially long military campaign; the new position of political parties in the wartime government; and the social and institutional consequences of living with a long-term threat.

Even if no one can predict the exact course of this military action (especially after the sudden fall of Kabul), the one thing that *can* be predicted is the effect on military doctrine: the war will be seen as strengthening the case for precision bombing. Every engagement, in fact, is seen that way.

Interpreting the effects of bombing is a much more politicized matter than interpreting the effects of ground combat, whose success always relies on surprise, unit cohesion, deception. Since the dawn of air power the lines of argument have been essentially the same. Look, we can do tremendous damage, the bombing advocates say. Yes, but will that actually make the enemy quit? the other side asks.

The strongest case for bombing is, obviously, Japan's surrender at the end of World War II. But that took two atomic bombs, and documents released in Japan after the war revealed that even after the second bomb much of the Japanese command wanted to fight on. When the war was over, the members of the Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that Allied bombing of Germany had been surprisingly ineffective in stopping Nazi war production. In every U.S. engagement since then initial reports have emphasized the precision and effectiveness of the bombing, whereas later assessments have found that the bombing, precise or not, was nowhere near as important as it initially seemed. Air doctrine, however, has continued unchanged—partly because it is driven by procurement budgets, but that's a different story. This pattern was clear in the Gulf War, with the famously misleading first-week videos of smart bombs all hitting their targets dead-on. It applied in Kosovo: the initial military interpretation was that heavy NATO bombing had forced Slobodan Milosevic to give in; but when the Serb army left the field, it appeared to bring out more undamaged equipment than NATO had thought was there in the first place. Only a handful of tanks and artillery pieces had actually been blown up. In Afghanistan the combination of U.S. bombs and Northern Alliance soldiers seemed to be rapidly effective in disorienting and weakening the Taliban and allowing the ground

troops of the Northern Alliance to rout it from the major cities. If dubious past results shored up a bombing strategy, just imagine what an actual success might do.

In his Atlanta speech Bush also talked briefly about politics, saying that it was time to “put needless partisanship behind us.” That left room for “needful” partisanship—and for the possibility of a political shift that could work to the Republicans’ disadvantage no matter how successful their prosecution of the war.

The elder George Bush’s defeat in 1992, after his heroic status as a war victor less than two years earlier, is a political fact hanging over this administration. In the conventional view, two things went wrong: the election took place during a recession, and the Republican Party’s right wing was angry because Bush had broken his “Read my lips” pledge not to impose new taxes.

If the current recession were driven purely by the business cycle, the current George Bush might have little to fear. Before the terrorist attacks even the darkest estimates were that a recovery would begin in a year or two. But wars have frequently changed economic assumptions. The Civil War rushed the North toward industrialization; spending for Vietnam brought on a decade of inflation. The question now is whether the war against terrorism will postpone that expected recovery long enough to handicap incumbents (to say nothing of the rest of us) by 2004.

Economists are now sizing up just how much was really new about the New Economy of the late 1990s. For instance, a recent report from the McKinsey Global Institute concludes that most of the apparent jump in U.S. labor productivity since 1995 has come in a handful of industries—mainly retail stores (notably Wal-Mart), wholesalers, and securities brokers, many of which used computers and the Internet to cut overhead and work more efficiently. Most of the rest of the economy ticked along essentially unchanged.

What seems certain is that almost none of the economy can tick along as smoothly for the foreseeable future. The essence of New Economy thinking, whether expressed by Alan Greenspan

or by a twenty-five-year-old looking for start-up capital, was that “frictionless” commerce and information flow would make everybody richer. Everything that has happened in response to terror, from microwaving bulky envelopes to allowing extra time for travel, can be thought of as friction for the economy. Wartime spending can add a stimulative boost, but the deadweight of combating terrorism can greatly delay a recovery. The last time Western economies encountered comparable friction was in the early 1970s, when the price of oil suddenly rose. Eventually that stimulated the growth of new, fuel-efficient industries, but for nearly a decade it slowed things down.

If his father paid the price for alienating the right wing back when Newt Gingrich was still on the rise, George W. Bush could suffer for trying to please the right while wartime circumstances move the public to the center.

This new war is a miracle for Democrats still concerned about their dovish post-Vietnam taint. Nearly all of them are for it, in contrast to just over a decade ago, when bitter arguments preceded the vote to authorize war on Iraq. Even the elite campuses are generally pro-war. Reaction to the attacks has drawn Democrats to the center with the rest of the country. In the center, people support the military as it fights al Qaeda, and they support government-funded efforts to keep the nation safe and strong.

“September eleventh brings to the fore issues that no one is in favor of ‘privatizing,’” Lawrence Summers, the president of Harvard, who served as Secretary of the Treasury during the last year and a half of the Clinton Administration, told me recently. “National defense, protection against terrorism, maintaining public health, putting out fires: inevitably these will lead to greater appreciation of the need for a strong, capable government, although”—and here he switched into the “adding the qualifier” mode he learned in Washington—“this appreciation will not and should not lead to a suspension of criticism with respect to government’s

excesses.” We don’t mind the government as much as we usually do, that is, when it’s the FDNY, the NTSB, and anthrax experts from the NIH and the CDC—and we don’t want minimum-wagers running the Border Patrol.

The Republicans in the House have not seen things this way. Their vote against making airport security screeners federal employees, after the Senate had unanimously passed the measure, made that clear, and so did their support for tax cuts in a “stimulus” program that will probably have no stimulative effect during the coming downturn. “There was a time right after September eleventh when we were able to get a number of important things done with almost a summitlike process,” Dick Gephardt, the House minority leader, told me recently. “I think everybody performed well, and we got those things done because they had to be done, in an emergency. It was an unusual moment. I knew it would not last. And the minute the Speaker [Dennis Hastert] ran out of gas for being able to pressure the Tom DeLays and the Dick Armeys to keep up some collaborative spirit, we got back to business as usual.”

But aren’t Republicans also heading toward the middle? “Well, the vote on airline security is instructive,” Gephardt said. “You had the hundred-to-nothing vote in the Senate. Sixty [House] Republicans or so basically signed on to that bill. But when all was said and done, you got like seven of them. The President was manning the phones with Cheney. We’re in the middle of this event, and they’re spending a lot of time to help the right wing of the party on this vote! I understand their problem—this is a very dominant group, very sure of their views.”

Banking on support from the wing of his party led by Arney and DeLay, Bush is calculating that the fundamental suspicion of government, itself a product of the war in Vietnam plus the War on Poverty, will not be changed by this war—that the post-Ronald Reagan strategy of running against government will keep winning. I bet he’s wrong, but we’ll see.



KEEPING THE NET SECURE

*September 11 demonstrated the great strength of the Internet.
Now it's time to address the Internet's weaknesses*

BY REED HUNDT

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On September 11 traditional telephone providers did a heroic job of struggling to restore service. When the World Trade Center towers fell, they severely damaged a Verizon central office with 350,000 voice lines and 3.5 million data circuits carrying the financial information that is the lifeblood of Wall Street firms. Verizon employees and those of many other telecommunications carriers worked night and day, alongside the firemen, the police, and volunteers, at their own recovery job. In about a week they had rerouted some two million data circuits, restored switches, and installed temporary power supplies. The other 1.5 million circuits originated in buildings that no longer exist.

In the days after the attack the number of voice calls in the five boroughs of New York City doubled, from the normal 115 million a day to more than 230 million. For the next six days Verizon waived charges for its pay phones in Manhattan. On a single day following the disaster residents placed some 22,000 local calls free of charge from regular sidewalk pay phones below Canal Street, and Williams Communications switched five million voice calls in the metropolitan area—three times the average daily volume. AT&T's long-distance volume jumped from a week-day average of about 300 million domestic voice calls to more than 431 million on September 11, the busiest weekday ever across AT&T's domestic voice network.

But despite the efforts to keep them in operation, under the extraordinary pressure of September 11 the traditional voice-telecommunications systems in the New York area and the Washington, D.C., area—both wire and wireless—were significantly overtaxed. In East Coast cities cell-phone networks could not keep up with demand. Many long-

distance calls inbound to New York City were blocked, in part to reserve circuits for outgoing calls. On that day the Internet proved its value as an essential part of the modern communications system.

More than half of America now uses the Internet. Globally, users number more than 300 million. Virtually all large businesses use the public Internet or private versions of the same technology to conduct their most important activities. So it was not surprising—although it was staggering—to see that on September 11

more than 1.2 billion instant messages were sent by AOL users alone. Slipping past the congested voice networks onto the PC screens of friends and family around the globe were the ties that bind us in the modern world: “R U OK?” “ALRIGHT?” “U THERE?”

As voice networks blocked incoming calls to New York in order to relieve congestion, some carriers pushed their voice traffic over the Internet. ITXC, which specializes in Internet voice services, saw its domestic wholesale business double on September 11 as carriers searched for new channels of communication; Yahoo's PC to Phone calling service increased by 59 percent. The performance of these voice-over-IP services suggests that in only a handful of years most voice traffic is likely to be carried on the Internet.

Why did the Internet work so well in the face of huge volume? Because its “distributed” technology is inherently robust. “Normal” phone connections, whether by means of wired line networks or by wireless cellular networks, open a specific circuit, or channel, connecting the person who is called and the caller. Just as if a superhighway lane were opened for one car only, the circuit remains dedicated to the conversation even if no one is speaking at the moment. If too many circuits are requested

at one time, the system blocks calls.

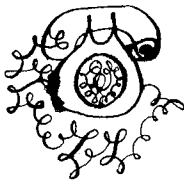
In contrast, Internet messages don't travel on designated circuits. Instead the messages are coded in 1s and 0s, and then disassembled into packets of data. The packets go out from the PC down the phone line and into the maze of interconnected fibers that envelops every metropolitan area of every developed country in the world. Like cars on a superhighway, packets share lanes on the Net.

Each packet contains a destination address. As the packet moves into the maze, it encounters a router that selects the next step in the network. If the router senses congestion on one route, it selects another. The AOL instant-message packets could work their way around the jams and outages of the voice network and find their destinations in seconds.

One lesson from September 11 is that in order to maintain an effective communications system in the face of any calamity, we should promote and protect the Internet as a primary network, encouraging the private sector and using the resources of the public sector to make it faster, more robust, ubiquitous, and better integrated with other media. This policy would be consistent with the Internet's original development as an aspect of national security.

Not many creators of Internet technology or leaders of Internet companies have been seriously interested in world affairs. Indeed, only yesterday many people imagined, naively, that the rise of the medium meant the end of government, the triumph of libertarian visions, and the dawning of a new age of spontaneous self-organization. In the long run the Net's emphasis on liberty can be fused with the needs of a civil, equitable, ordered state. But in the short run we need practical steps to help keep the Internet secure. The world's citizens, businesses, and governments should come together to take two actions.

First, Internet access should be made truly global. In less developed countries this means expanding communications systems so that more people have exposure to and access to in-



formation from the outside world. Obviously, communications technology does not by itself end conflict or convert nations to democracy. But it helps, and those goals are easier to reach with a modern communications system than without one. However our current war against terrorism ends, along the way the United States and its allies will undoubtedly make a variety of economic promises to the Central Asian states whose support we need. It would be better to direct aid toward thought-out goals than to grant it slapdash. A \$10 billion investment fund for communications improvements throughout the developing world, managed by an independent board and funded half by private institutions and half by governments, would be a wise use of our resources.

In developed countries universal access means ensuring that businesses and citizens can all get high-speed connections to the Internet, much as they now have universal dial-tone access to the traditional telephone system. The United States has a long history of subsidizing the growth of a democratically

available communications system. In keeping with the established universal-service policy, business and suburban customers of telephone services are "overcharged" some \$30 billion each year in order to subsidize basic telephone rates for rural customers. Diverting \$10 billion of this universal-service funding could eventually make broadband service available on a near universal basis. Consumers could draw on a federal fund for whichever competing service they chose. The fund would pay a high proportion of the total cost for poor and rural users, a low one or none at all for rich users. Andy Grove, the chairman of Intel, recently called for a similar investment plan.

Second, the Internet's defenses need to be strengthened. The networks that compose its backbone should be encouraged with strong incentives to develop redundant interconnection points and diverse paths. The Internet's conceptual design makes it inherently resilient, but its physical structure and hardware need to be more secure than they are now. The one or two dozen essential crossroads of the Internet are

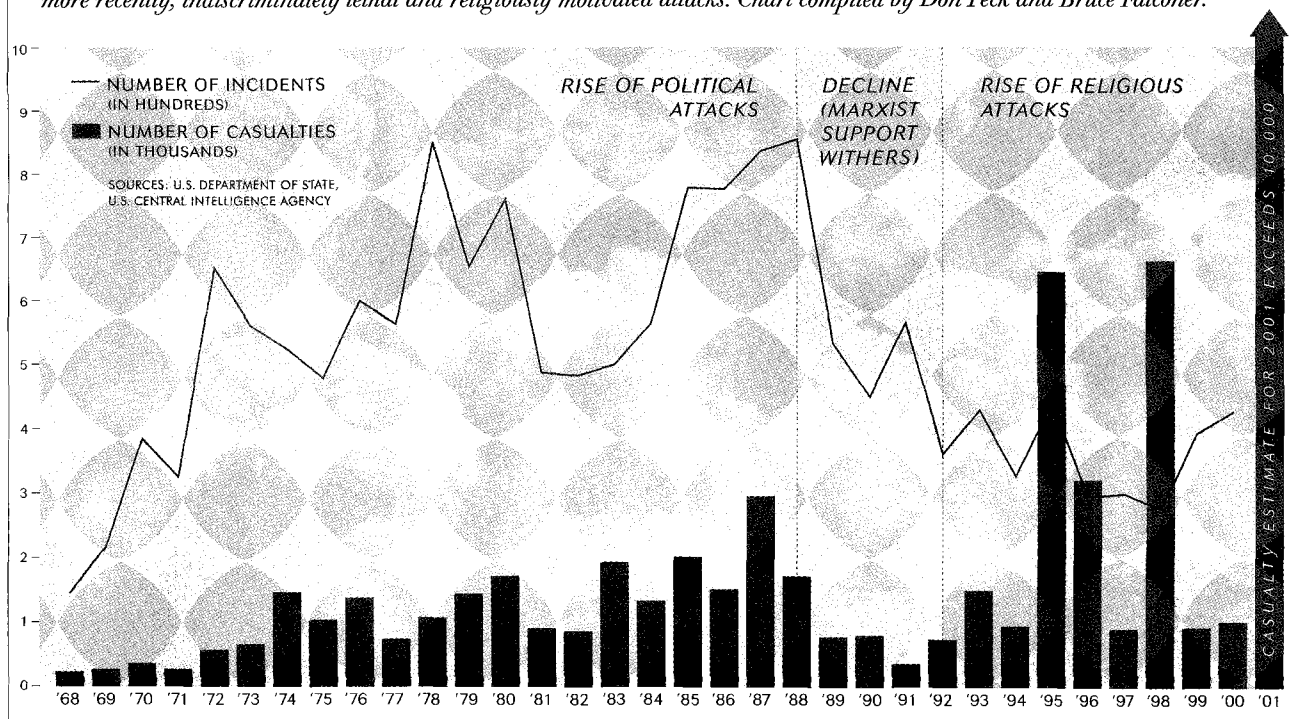
basically collections of computers in buildings. These are vital nodes of our national security, and they ought to be as carefully protected as our military installations. The Internet has a rising number of co-location facilities where many fiber cables are aggregated. If any of them goes down, traffic can be interrupted for long periods. This became clear last summer in Baltimore, when a train derailment damaged a substantial fiber link—and affected the flow of Internet traffic around the globe.

Every essential node should have a backup. Internet messages are now carried mainly on fiber-optic systems. These systems should be backed up by microwave and satellite-transmission systems. General Motors is seeking federal approval for sale of its Hughes DirecTV satellite system. A condition of the approval could be that GM provide backup satellite capacity.

The terrorists did not directly target our communications networks, but those networks are an integral part of the democratic capitalism that they did attack. And we can use those networks to help fight back. ▀

TERRORIST ACTIVITY SINCE 1968

The modern terrorist era—in which acts are directed at civilian and international targets—is often said to have begun in 1968. Since then terrorism has evolved in two main phases: initially, "low-impact" and politically motivated attacks; and, more recently, indiscriminately lethal and religiously motivated attacks. Chart compiled by Don Peck and Bruce Falconer.



NOTES & DISPATCHES

AT LARGE

COPING STRATEGIES

When Godzilla gets the willies

BY P. J. O'ROURKE

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Six weeks into the most modern of conflicts, contemporary war seemed to exhibit the vulgarity (in this sense, universality) that Oscar Wilde said would be needed to make warfare unpopular. The opening offensive was directed at the ordinary, the workaday, the commonplace. And common people, not self-exalted *jihad* warriors, are showing the bravery and making the sacrifices—in Afghanistan as well as in the United States. Then, in a more Wildean sense of the word “vulgar,” there’s the anthrax. A cowflop of a weapon has elicited all sorts of bull in response. On October 20 the *Los Angeles Times* devoted 465 column inches to a disease that had sickened fewer people (some press reports would claim) than the corporation that makes the antibiotic by which the disease is cured. Only five months ago Bayer withdrew the anti-cholesterol drug Baycol after it had been linked to fifty-two deaths.

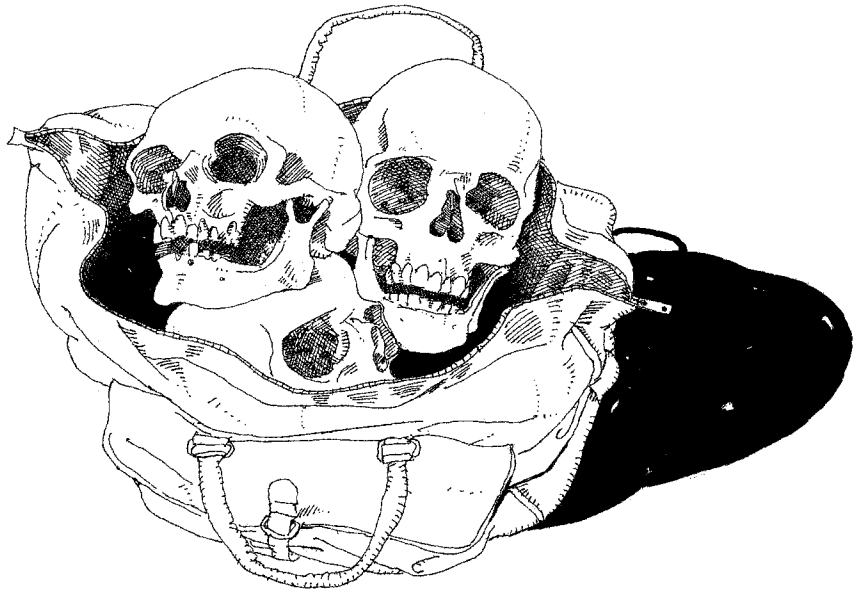
Fortunately, my family doctor, William Hughes, has expertise in the most virulent aspect of anthrax—publicity. Hughes is married to the ABC News White House correspondent Ann Compton. He suggested that I get a Ciproflaxin prescription, lest anyone think I was too far down the journalism food chain to receive threatening mail. And indeed, there have been threats in my mail, but only the usual from Visa, American Express, and the landlord.

One of the first anthrax attacks was made against the company that owns *The National Enquirer*. The company’s name is displayed in large letters on its suburban Florida offices: AMERICAN MEDIA. Perhaps al Qaeda is less sophis-

ticated than we feared. “Ah,” thought the bin Laden operatives, “*here* is where the American media have their place of headquarters.” On the other hand, considering the role of supermarket tabloids in America’s life of the mind, perhaps al Qaeda is more sophisticated than we thought.

Anyway, the media were enormously reassuring, simultaneously telling the public that members of the public won’t contract anthrax and giving non-stop coverage to the members of the public who did, will, or might. Then Tom Ridge, the head of the Office of

of anthrax results in “nausea, lack of appetite, and fever.” And so—if boiling rage counts as fever—does being on a commercial flight. I’ve flown on ten since September 11, owing to an author tour for a badly timed collection of light humorous essays. (Not that I’m complaining about being knocked off the medium-well-seller list by people who spent ten minutes with Osama bin Laden’s brother-in-law in 1976. Especially not after hearing publishing-world scuttlebutt about a certain Manhattan novelist, famous for tales of fashion models and drug excess, whose reaction on September



Homeland Security, came on the air, reminding us how much “Homeland Security” sounds like a failed savings-and-loan. Didn’t Grandma lose \$15,000 in a CD when Homeland Security went under? The media also recounted the complete list of symptoms for all three types of anthrax infection—symptoms that correspond to those of the common cold, the flu, a hangover, acne, and eating the church-picnic potato salad.

According to CNN on October 19, being infected with the intestinal form

11, it’s said, was to exclaim how glad he was that he didn’t have a book out. Discriminating readers are *always* glad when he doesn’t have a book out.)

I understand that airport security may soon be turned over to the government, so that a federal agency can do the same fine job of protecting the nation in the future that the CIA and the FBI did in early September. Meanwhile, “heightened security precautions” are allowing airlines to perfect their technique of treating passengers like

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOE GIARDIELLO

convicted felons and providing all the transportation amenities usually accorded to smuggled cockatoos.

At the Los Angeles airport I watched as an elderly man was forced to remove his buckle shoes and send them through the carry-on-baggage x-ray. In Ontario, California, a friend was meeting me at the airport. Of course, he couldn't wait at curbside. He had to circle through the arrivals lane while slugs (slugs with valid photo IDs!) delivered my checked bags. On the fourth go-around a policeman stepped into the road and told my friend that if he drove by one more time, he'd be ticketed.

What's causing the giant python lines at airport security checkpoints remains a mystery. An acquaintance, a plastic surgeon who specializes in cranial reconstruction, was returning from a conference on head injuries on September 11. His hand luggage contained three human skulls. These passed unremarked through the x-ray screening.

Doubtless all sorts of civil rights are to be sacrificed temporarily in times of crisis. But there is no ACLU for comfort and convenience. A generation hence we'll be living in a world of metal detectors in nudist colonies.

Traveling around the country has, however, allowed me to see how different regions of America are coping with current events. On October 9 a TV anchorman in Washington, D.C., called Islam (using an adjective perhaps left behind by the sudden journalistic shift away from celebrity obsession) "the second most popular religion on earth." It has an amazing Q Factor, too, that Islam.

At about the same time, aided by the Internet, there was a cheerful realization nationwide that "Taliban" scans perfectly in "The Banana Boat Song":

Come Mr. Taliban, rid me of Osama.
Air Force come and it flatten me
home.
Cruise missile,
Tomahawk,
Half-ton bomb.
Air Force come and it flatten me
home.

On October 16, in Austin, Texas, local TV reported that the Austin Fire Department had responded to a call from a household concerning a "sus-

picious package." The sole suspicious thing about the package was that it had been mailed from New York City.

On October 19 a chipper announcer for KFWB radio, in southern California, said, "Anthrax news certainly has Orange County people talking ..." Later that day, at a lunch in Simi Valley, I was sitting next to someone from the Ventura County district attorney's office. He said that local 911 dispatchers were being overwhelmed by anthrax alarms, and that the only practical decontamination response would be to have people get naked and be hosed down. That evening, on the set of a public-television book show, T. C. Boyle talked about how he has a certain admiration for acts of "ecotage," but in his fiction he tries to show both sides of the story. He managed never to mention September 11.

I can remember when powdery white substances of sinister origin were doing a lot more damage to Americans than anthrax has done so far. Circa 1980 Americans were suffering "nasaltage." It emptied bank accounts, wrecked marriages, sabotaged thousands of careers, and brought the nation to its knees (with a soda straw, over a glass coffee table). But Attorney General John Ashcroft has been very firm in stating that anthrax threats are no laughing matter. Pranks and jests concerning anthrax will be treated as serious criminal actions. Thus various larval jokes with "You've got mail" punch lines must be allowed to die before maturation. And the heavy-metal band Anthrax is considering changing its name—presumably to Chicken Pox.

Are we as a nation forgetting what our international critics have been saying for years? Aren't we supposed to be a big, terrifying nation—a Godzilla of capitalism, wrecking the globe? Since when does Godzilla flip out because he might have brushed against something in the mail room while he was devouring Trenton, New Jersey? Since when does Godzilla turn (devastating) tail and scamper to Mexico to buy Cipro over the counter? I trust this is a momentary lapse. And I'm sure that Osama bin Laden is discovering, midst smart bombs and Delta forces, that America isn't scared—America is *scary*.

MOSCOW

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

The Russian public has come out against supporting the West in its war against terrorism. The West need not be concerned

BY JEFFREY TAYLER

.....

Polls conducted by the prominent All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion show that as of September 25 only 11 percent of Russians supported a military assault on the Taliban and al Qaeda; the majority did not approve of letting the United States use Russian military bases in Tajikistan, did not want Russia to fight alongside the United States in Afghanistan, and favored strict neutrality in the conflict.

This might have looked like a damaging blow to Vladimir Putin, whose recent lurch toward the West has been the most prominent policy initiative since he came to office, in May of 2000. It might also have seemed a portent of trouble in Russia—and for the allied forces, the conduct of whose war has depended in part on Russian logistical support. Yet the same polls gave Putin a personal-approval rating of 73 percent (for the past twelve months his ratings have consistently hovered around 70 percent), and there are no signs of a shift in public opinion. In short, Putin's popularity is not diminishing as a result of his deeply unpopular policy.

Astonishing? No. If we look back a little more than a year, we find a telling precedent. Putin suffered a bout of relatively low opinion-poll ratings (60 percent approval) after he decided to continue his vacation on the Black Sea while sailors were drowning aboard the doomed nuclear submarine *Kursk*. But a month later his ratings were up again, and some Russians to whom I spoke after the disaster told me that their President had done right in staying at his resort, because to have cut short his holiday would have shown susceptibility to public opinion—an unforgivable weakness in a ruler here. Putin had his eye on survival over the long term, and was loath to appease public sentiment in the short term. By flouting public

opinion but showing his resolve he retained popularity among his electorate. I have heard similar comments from Russians with respect to his current support for the West—namely, that their leader should ignore the griping masses and get on with his job.

What does the discrepancy between the popularity of President Putin and the disapproval of his actions mean? The answer to this question, which is not being asked in Russia, lies in the different ways in which Westerners and Russians view political authority. In the West elected leaders are regarded, at least ideally, as representing the people, and they are oath-bound to respond to the popular will. Russians, however, tend to regard the people (their own people, that is) as ignorant, as *bydlo* (cattle) who have to be dominated, for their own good and for the good of the state. This unforgiving view has permeated even the thinking of the intelligentsia, who have historically posited reform as a means of transforming the masses into something less stubborn and irrational than the intelligentsia have held them to be. A Russian leader derives much of his legitimacy from his ability to create the impression of strength, to inspire fear along with respect, and to pursue not the fulfillment of his citizens' (selfish and erratic) desires but the national interest, especially as embodied in the great-power role Russians claim as theirs by birthright.

Historically, this concern for the greatness of Russia is evident in the leaders many Russians have most revered: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Joseph Stalin. They were tyrants all—but tyrants obsessed with increasing the power of Russia, and tyrants who succeeded in doing exactly that by employing the most brutal means imaginable. (No opinion polls were taken during their reigns, but certainly the prospect of being boiled alive, dragooned into draining swamps, or worked to death in frozen tundra could hardly have elicited much enthusiasm among their subjects.) The rule is this: if a Russian leader has a redoubtable image and is perceived to be working for the greatness of his country, he can ignore popular disapproval

of his policies (except, perhaps, in election times) and will end up the more respected for it. Public-opinion polls therefore reflect sentiments that are, in effect, stillborn; they have little to do with whether people are prepared to resist their leader or attempt to force him to change his policies. Thus public opinion does not play a significant role in Kremlin policy. That is all the more true since the state has brought the independent media to heel.

This does not mean that the Russians will rise up against Putin if they find him somewhat less resolute or intimidating than he has been. They often say that fear is in their genes, owing to their gov-



ernment's history of repressing its citizens. When pressed, Russians, largely out of fear, have obeyed their leaders, even to the point of destroying friends and neighbors and abetting mass arrests, expropriations, and murder. They have done all this and they made the Soviet Union a superpower. In fact, they have traditionally identified superpower status with repressive rule from the Kremlin.

Consequently, Putin's past ideally suits him to run Russia. Before becoming President he spent most of his career in the KGB and became the head of its successor agency, the Federal Security Service. This gives him fearsome, patriotic, and implicitly anti-Western bona fides that no liberal Russian politician could match. Compare Putin in this regard with

Boris Yeltsin, who often appeared to be more concerned with keeping on good terms with "friend Bill" than with working for the good of Russia. Putin, who is not viewed as a "friend of George" (or a friend of any foreign leader, for that matter), consistently ranks as the most trusted politician in Russia; with a trust rating of 42 percent, he stands 26 points ahead of the runner-up: Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the Communist Party.

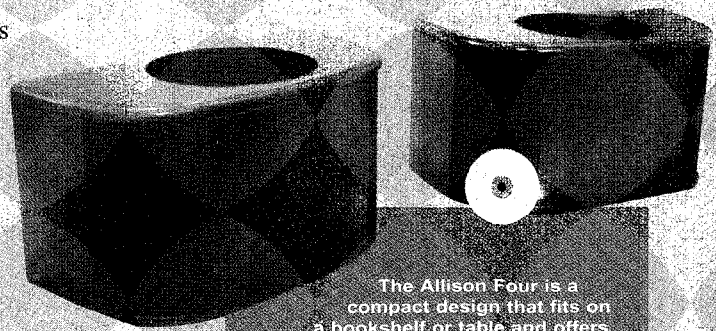
But is not what is good for the Russian people good for Russia? Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Western notion that freedom, justice, and improved standards of living should be the business of the Kremlin took hold among the public; but it quickly dissipated when these desiderata proved difficult to attain and the West seemed bent on exploiting Russia's weakness. Eventually, humiliation over the eastward expansion of NATO and NATO's war in Yugoslavia (a Russian ally at the time), plus the failure to establish an economy based on free competition and the rule of law, buried pro-Western sentiments in Russia and helped bring to power Putin, a nationalist whose campaign was based on pledges to "strengthen the state" and establish a "dictatorship of the law." (That Zyuganov was his opponent in the elections contributed to Putin's victory—the Russian public had shown in national elections and referenda several times since 1991 that it no longer believed the Communists could run the country, let alone restore its superpower status.) A stronger state and a dictatorship of the law meant the imposition of order on the near chaos Yeltsin had left behind, and that, Russians understood, would in turn mean a restriction of their liberties. In sum, they were voting into office someone who would not listen to them but would work for the good of Russia.

At least these days it appears that they were right to have done so. In the hours after the September 11 attacks, far ahead of any opinion polls, Putin addressed the Russian public and offered unstinting support to the United States. He thus anticipated the division of the world into pro- and anti-terrorist camps which was to become the policy of the United States (and therefore of the West) when President Bush announced to Congress,

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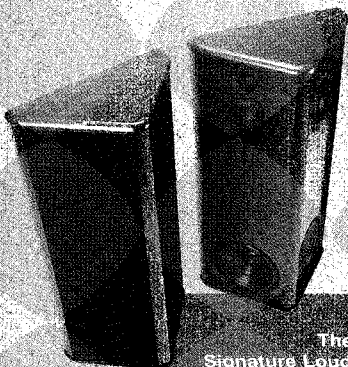
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nine days later, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Putin's offer of aid to the United States came not out of sympathy but primarily out of an understanding that the perpetrators of the attacks in New York and Washington

could easily turn their hand to Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Whether or not the Russians yet understand this, their President does—and that is what counts in a land where the leader leads and the people, like it or not, follow.

LONDON

THE FRUITS OF THE TORY REVOLUTION

The recent election of the party's new leader is the surprising result of four decades of reform

BY GEOFFREY WHEATCROFT

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In January of 1964 *The Spectator* published one of the most influential political articles ever written. Innocuously titled "The Tory Leadership," it was by Iain Macleod, the magazine's new editor, who until the previous October had been a senior minister in the government of Harold Macmillan. Macleod was a liberal Tory who wanted to see his party reconstructed, as indeed it was, owing partly to him. The process culminated this past September in the accession of the startlingly unliberal Iain Duncan Smith—IDS, as his friends call him—to the party leadership. Has there ever been such a case of unintended consequences? And what would the first Iain have made of the latest one?

Early in the autumn of 1963 Macmillan had resigned abruptly. He was succeeded by Sir Alec Douglas-Home, rather than by R. A. Butler, the man Macleod and many others in the Cabinet and the country wanted. There was no election and no transparency whatsoever to the proceedings. The Queen appointed her new Prime Minister after Home's name "emerged" from Havana-smoke-filled rooms. In *The Spectator*, Macleod blew the whistle on how this had happened and gave another phrase to the language of politics when he wrote of "the magic circle" behind the decision. The circle's tightness was emphasized by the fact that "neither the Chancellor of the Exchequer nor the Leader of the House of Commons [Macleod himself] had any inkling of what was happening." In still-more-lethal words he listed the conspirators and added, "Eight of the nine men mentioned in the last sentence went to Eton."

To re-read Macleod's article today is to realize the scale of the Tory revolution. The party led by IDS is almost unrecognizable as the party Macleod loved, hated, and helped to transform before his premature death, in 1970. Although the *Spectator* article made him intensely unpopular, it exorcised the magic circle. Every subsequent Tory leader has been elected by the Tory members of Parliament—until four years ago, when a hybrid (or half-baked) scheme was devised under which the MPs vote until they have produced two names, which then go on to party members throughout the country.

Even granting the Tory propensity for choosing unlikely leaders, from Benjamin Disraeli to Margaret Thatcher, Duncan Smith is a remarkable choice. Americans who hadn't heard of him needn't worry: not many people here had either. Last June, when the previous party leader, William Hague, announced his resignation in the aftermath of another disastrous electoral defeat, the obvious candidates to succeed him were Michael Portillo and Kenneth Clarke. I shan't recite the chapter of accidents by which they lost out, but I don't know anyone—any political correspondent, that is, let alone any chap in the pub—who guessed then that Duncan Smith would now be the leader. And even after rising without a trace, IDS remains mysterious. At a lunch in 1991 I playfully asked the late Enoch Powell, a cranky, intellectual high Tory, what he made of John Major, our new Prime Minister, and was told, "I simply find myself asking, Does he really exist?" IDS exists, I

think, but he seems almost to recede from view the harder one looks at him.

At forty-seven, Duncan Smith is younger than Prime Minister Tony Blair but older than Hague, and he looks older still: having lost an election under a foggyish, right-wing, bald leader, the Tories have replaced him with someone more foggyish, further to the right, and even balder. In person he is affable, even engaging, quiet-spoken and modest in manner, belying very hard-line views in favor of capital punishment and national sovereignty. In choosing IDS, a former army officer whose father was a wartime Spitfire ace, the party has made as much a cultural as a political statement. There is something a little trying about a Clinton or a Blair parading his credentials as a member of the rock-and-roll generation, but with IDS one wonders whether he has ever worn a pair of jeans in his life. The point was captured in an exchange between a well-known liberal columnist and a right-wing, warmly pro-IDS newspaper editor: "Your fellow seems pleasant enough, but isn't he a bit 1950s?" "What's wrong with the 1950s?"

The mystery begins, in part, with his ancestry—only during the election campaign did we learn, for example, that he has a Japanese great-grandmother—and thickens with his education. He went to a naval academy with the reputation



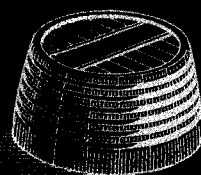
of being a less-than-illustrious place for less-than-brilliant boys, and then to Sandhurst, our West Point. Some way from the brightest cadet of his year, he was nevertheless commissioned into the Scots Guards and served for six years, part of the time in Northern Ireland. This history fits what might be called the Sinn Fein image: another Saxon oppressor of the Gael. Actually, and more significant, IDS has an Irish mother, and he is the first Catholic ever to lead the Tories.

After Margaret Thatcher came to power, in 1979, she carried out something like a bloodless purge of the opposition within her party, embodied by the upper-class Tory old-guard members Ian Gilmour, Christopher Soames, Lord Carrington, and Francis Pym. All four men mentioned in the last sentence went to Eton. That was indirectly the effect of Macleod's attack on the magic circle. What he didn't foresee was that with its spell broken, the Tories would move further and further to the right. Of course, this movement is partly a response to the general collapse of the left, and the joke isn't just on the Conservatives. During the leadership contest Canon Paul Oestreicher, a veteran radical cleric, wrote to the *Daily Telegraph*, "Why do decent Tories of the Centre-Right make such heavy weather of finding a leader, when they need to look no further than the Prime Minister?" True enough—but that fact would be small consolation to Macleod if he could see a Tory party with its most reactionary leader in generations.

Owing to the new procedure, the election was absurdly protracted, taking more than three months, and the Tories named Wednesday, September 12, as the day they would declare their new leader. As it proved, the previous day witnessed a catastrophe of world-historical importance across the Atlantic. The Tories postponed their announcement for twenty-four hours, as a mark of respect, but in any case it now seemed utterly trivial. The following day the House of Commons met in an emergency session. During his first outing as leader of the opposition, Duncan Smith stood shoulder to shoulder with the government, and with the Americans. His stance was sincere. IDS is as ardently pro-American as he is anti-European; he has moved on

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the fringes of the military-intelligence complex in Washington as well as here; and he warmly supports President George Bush in general and national missile defense in particular. And yet: after the unhappy date of IDS's election, he had more bad luck. His first speech to a Tory conference as leader fell in the week the bombing of Afghanistan began. He is not an exciting speaker anyway, but his speech was inevitably low-key, as he stood utterly overshadowed by a Prime Minister bestriding the world.

Listening to that speech, I couldn't help wondering what Iain Macleod—one of the most exhilarating speakers of his age—would have made of it, and thinking how baffled and dismayed he would have been by the new Iain. Others appear to agree. A dozen leading Tories have declined to join the new opposition team, Portillo and Clarke among them. They don't like IDS's politics, and they can also recognize a lost cause. Maybe there's not so much wrong with the 1950s. They were just rather a long time ago.

NEW YORK CITY

HOW TO MAKE THE COUNTRY'S MOST DANGEROUS JOB SAFER

The power lies with one hamburger vendor

BY ERIC SCHLOSSER

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In September of 1990 the McDonald's Corporation sued five members of London Greenpeace for libel, claiming that one of their leaflets ("What's wrong with McDonald's? Everything they don't want you to know") contained false and defamatory statements. Three of the activists quickly apologized to McDonald's and were dropped from the lawsuit, but the other two, Dave Morris and Helen Steel, decided to battle the company in court. The case turned into the longest trial in British history, and also a worldwide public-relations disaster for McDonald's—years of testimony about corporate greed, deceit, and misbehavior. Although the judge's verdict in 1997 and an appellate court's decision two years later found that many of the leaflet's statements were libelous, both rulings acknowledged that some of its accusations—about low pay, cruelty to animals, and exploitative advertising—were not. A libel suit designed to silence a pair of unknown activists instead brought a great deal of attention to their anti-corporate views.

Ever since the debacle of the "Mc-Libel" trial the McDonald's Corporation has tried to improve its public image and at times to behave in a more socially responsible manner. Last spring it began to offer discounts on health insurance and other benefits to employees at

company-owned (as opposed to franchise) restaurants, which make up about one seventh of the chain nationwide. In the summer it disclosed the basic ingredients of its natural flavors, admitting that in the United States its french fries get their distinctive taste from beef additives. Perhaps out of deference to Hindus, the company no longer uses beef extract in the manufacture of Chicken McNuggets (McDonald's has never used beef flavoring in India).

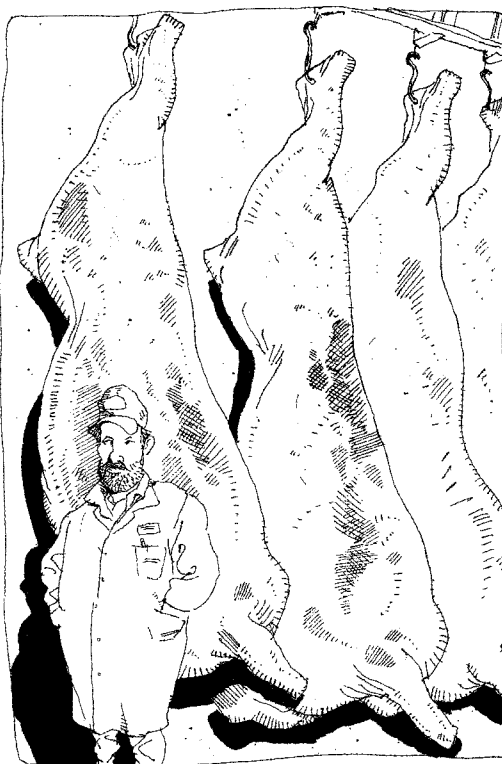
More important, McDonald's now requires that its meat suppliers handle and slaughter animals humanely. This new policy did not arise in a vacuum. For years excessive line speeds and improper stunning at American slaughterhouses resulted in the dismemberment of cattle and hogs while they were still conscious. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and other animal-rights groups staged protests at McDonald's, asking the company to seek changes from its suppliers. Whatever the true motive, in 1999 McDonald's acted decisively and hired Temple Grandin, one of the nation's foremost experts on animal welfare and proper livestock handling, to devise an auditing system for the slaughterhouses that provide the chain's beef and pork. According to Grandin, the threat that McDonald's would stop buying meat from suppliers that mistreat

animals changed many of the industry's practices within a year. The auditors who check compliance work for the companies that make McDonald's hamburger patties, but Grandin says that they seem genuinely committed to the new policy—making unannounced visits to slaughterhouses, for example, to observe whether animals are properly handled and stunned. Animal-rights groups had gotten nowhere by advocating such an inspection program; demanded by McDonald's, it received the enthusiastic support of the meat-packing industry and the American Meat Institute.

Having demonstrated a strong commitment to the ethical treatment of animals, the McDonald's Corporation should now demonstrate the same level of concern for the human beings who work in the nation's slaughterhouses. Nearly a century after the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, meat-packing is still the most dangerous job in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one out of four meat-packers suffered a job-related injury or illness in 1999—a proportion higher than that in any other U.S. industry. The rate of serious injuries in meat-packing (as measured in lost workdays) is also the highest: more than five times the national average in private industry. The rate of cumulative trauma injuries, such as back problems and tendinitis, is about thirty-three times the national average. And these extraordinarily high rates of injury are based on the meat-packing industry's own reporting. In an industry where the unions are weak, the workers are often illegal immigrants, and some of the leading companies have been caught falsifying injury records, the actual number of injuries is likely even higher.

Working conditions, as I reported in my book *Fast Food Nation* (2001), have improved greatly since the days of Upton Sinclair. Nevertheless, a beef slaughterhouse offers countless opportunities for

serious harm. Despite the introduction of various power tools and saws, most of the work is still done by hand. Hundreds of workers wielding sharp knives stand along a single production line, and the most common slaughterhouse injury is a laceration. In the old Chicago packinghouses teams of workers disassembled about fifty cattle an hour and performed a variety of tasks throughout the day. In modern American slaughterhouses the line speeds can approach 400 cattle an hour, and the new division of labor requires workers to perform the same task again and again. Some workers make the same knife cut up to 10,000 times a day. When workers feel rushed, accidents are likelier to occur. Excessive line speeds have been linked to injuries, inhumane slaughter practices, and food-safety prob-



lems. The economics of the industry only encourage faster line speeds: the money a slaughterhouse earns is directly related to the speed of production. A faster pace means higher profits.

In recent years the leading meat-packing firms have managed to operate with little public scrutiny of the high injury rates in their plants. The three companies that produce most of the nation's beef—IBP, ConAgra, and Excel—are not household names. America's slaughter-

houses are now located in rural areas, far from the headquarters of the national media. And the majority of the industry's workers—impoverished immigrants from Mexico—lack the political clout that might bring attention to their plight. For the past two decades the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has been an underfunded and often ineffectual agency. Last year's vote in Congress to rescind OSHA's new ergonomics standard, designed to reduce cumulative trauma injuries, suggests that the federal government has little real interest in the nation's most dangerous job.

The McDonald's Corporation has proved that it can force its meat-packing suppliers to make fundamental changes quickly. "If McDonald's is requiring something of their suppliers, it has a pretty profound effect," a spokeswoman for the American Meat Institute told a reporter. "Because we have the world's biggest shopping cart," a McDonald's spokesman said, "we can use that leadership to provide more focus and order throughout the beef system." Both were referring to new rules about cattle feed which the company has imposed on its beef suppliers. But the comments apply equally to the issue of worker safety. If McDonald's were to insist that the large meat-packers improve working conditions and reduce injury levels, they would immediately do so. The cost of slowing down their production lines would be insignificant compared with the cost of losing their biggest customer.

If McDonald's can send auditors into slaughterhouses to ensure the ethical treatment of cattle, it can certainly do the same for poor immigrant workers. The company should be held accountable for the behavior of the firms that supply the ground beef for its Big Macs, just as Nike has been held accountable for the behavior of the overseas companies that manufacture its sneakers. And unlike reconfiguring shoe factories on distant continents, making important changes in the slaughterhouses of Colorado, Nebraska, Texas, and Washington wouldn't take long. It wouldn't even take weeks. All it would take is one clear demand that line speeds be slowed down, preventing countless injuries—one clear demand from McDonald's. ▀

[*The Hard Questions*]

A NEW GRAND STRATEGY

For more than fifty years American foreign policy has sought to prevent the emergence of other great powers—a strategy that has proved burdensome, futile, and increasingly risky. The United States will be more secure, and the world more stable, if America now chooses to pass the buck and allow other countries to take care of themselves

BY BENJAMIN SCHWARZ
AND CHRISTOPHER LAYNE

Illustrations (pages 36–55) by Kamil Vojnar

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Since the end of the Cold War, U.S. grand strategy has revolved around maintaining this country's overwhelming military, economic, and political preponderance. Until now most Americans have acquiesced in that strategy, because the costs seemed to be tolerably low. But the September 11 attacks have proved otherwise. Those assaults were neither random nor irrational. Those who undertook them acted with cool calculation to force the United States to alter specific policies—policies that largely flow from the global role America has chosen. The attacks were also a violent reaction to the very fact of America's pre-eminence.

Several tasks confront us. The most immediate is the one that rightly preoccupies the nation now: tracking down the al Qaeda terrorists and destroying their networks and their infrastructure, and waging war on the Taliban movement that harbors them. The larger task will take time, because it amounts to inventing a new American stance toward the world for the century ahead. We need to come to grips with an ironic possibility: that the very preponderance of American power may now make us not more secure but less secure. By the same token, it may actually be possible to achieve more of our ultimate foreign-policy goals by means of a diminished global presence.

Great powers have two basic strategic options: they can pursue geopolitical dominance (a "unipolar" strategy), or they can seek to maintain a rough balance of power among the strongest states in a region or around the world (a "multipolar"



lar" strategy). Since the late 1940s the United States has chosen the former course. True, even during the Cold War, when the world was essentially divided between the United States and the Soviet Union, a number of astute foreign-policy thinkers—including Walter Lippmann, George Kennan, and J. William Fulbright—argued that it was in America's interest to encourage Western Europe's and Japan's revival as independent great powers to relieve the United States of what Kennan called the "burdens of bi-polarity." But almost all American policymakers

held that the United States had to contain its allies as much as it had to contain Moscow. By providing for the security of Britain, France, and (especially) Germany and Japan—by defending their access to far-flung economic and natural resources, and by enmeshing their foreign and military policies in alliances that America dominated—Washington prevented these former and potential great powers from embarking on independent, and (from the U.S. perspective) possibly destabilizing, foreign policies. This "reassurance strategy" (to use a term currently favored by policymakers) allowed for an unprecedented level of political and economic cooperation among the states of Western Europe and East Asia.

As noted, American policy since the end of the Cold War has aimed to ensure that the United States maintains its lofty perch. Every post-Cold War Pentagon assessment of national-security needs has insisted that America maintain its globe-girdling Cold War alliances, along with its Cold War defense-spending levels, even though the threat against

which those alliances and budgets were ostensibly erected has disappeared. Some critics argue that this apparent stasis is born of bureaucratic inertia, or of a defense establishment's jealous guarding of its turf (and its trough). But in fact, given the logic behind American grand strategy, this continuity is entirely justifiable. The collapse of the Soviet Union hasn't altered the conviction among many American policymakers that a stable global economic and political order depends on Washington's maintaining preponderance (or, according to the official rhetoric, "leadership") over potential great powers. This means ameliorating their security problems.

The now infamous draft of the Pentagon's Defense Planning Guidance (prepared under the direction of the current undersecretary of defense for policy, Paul Wolfowitz), which was leaked to *The New York Times* in 1992, merely stated in undiplomatic language the logic that has long informed Washington's strategy. The United States, it argued, must continue to dominate the international system and thus to "discourage" the "advanced industrial nations from challenging our leadership or ... even aspiring to a larger regional or global role." To accomplish this Washington must do nothing less than "retain the pre-eminent responsibility for addressing ... those wrongs which threaten not only our interests, but those of our allies or friends, or which could seriously unsettle international relations." In other words, America must provide its allies with what one of the document's authors (now a special assistant to the President on the National Security Council) termed "adult supervision": the United States must not only impose a military protectorate over Europe and East Asia—regions composed of wealthy and technologically sophisticated states—but also safeguard Europe's and East Asia's worldwide interests, so that they need not develop military forces capable of "global power projection." (As Gabriel Robin, a former French representative to NATO, acknowledged, the U.S.-led alliance's "real function ... is to serve as the chaperon of Europe." It is, Robin said, "the means to prevent [Europe] from establishing itself as an independent fortress and perhaps one day, a rival.") Those who argue that America's national-security spending is too high, given the end of the Cold War, often fail to appreciate the task Washington has assigned itself. The adult supervision of the world is an enormously expensive and complex undertaking, which perforce means that the United States must spend more on its military than do the next nine countries together—including Russia, Japan, China, France, Britain, and Germany.

An adult-supervision strategy entails a peculiar and recon-dite calculation of the world situation. For instance, although most Americans might believe that a reunified, democratic Korea would indisputably be in America's interests, the former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard* (probably the fullest and frankest public exposition of America's post-Cold War global strategy), repeatedly explains how this development would in

fact jeopardize America's unipolar strategy: it would, he argues, reflecting views long and widely held in policymaking circles, obviate the ostensible need for U.S. troops on the peninsula, which could lead to a U.S. pullback from East Asia, which could, in turn, lead to Japan's becoming "militarily more self-sufficient," which would lead to political, military, and economic rivalry among the region's states. Thus the best situation is the status quo in Korea, which allows for U.S. forces to be stationed there indefinitely.

Similar—and more urgent, given the current war on terrorism—is the thinking underlying Washington's policy in the Persian Gulf. Why is the United States so deeply embroiled in this turbulent region? Many people, echoing a comment by Secretary of State James A. Baker during the Persian Gulf War, would probably answer with one word: oil. This answer is—and was—both true and misleading. America derives most of its oil from Alaska, Canada, the continental United States, Mexico, and Venezuela. About 25 percent of U.S. petroleum imports come from the Persian Gulf. If the United States adopted a national energy strategy, it could free itself from dependence on Persian Gulf oil. Nevertheless, Washington assumes responsibility for stabilizing the region because Western Europe and Japan are heavily dependent on its oil, and because soon China, owing to rapid economic growth, will be as well—and America wants to discourage those powers from developing the means to protect that resource for themselves. In an interview on National Public Radio early in October, Walter Russell Mead, a senior foreign-policy analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations, explained the basis of U.S. policy in the terms that NSC staffers, think-tank analysts, and State and Defense Department policy planners have used for years: "We do not get that large a percentage of our oil from the Middle East. Japan gets a lot more ... And one of the reasons that we are sort of assuming this role of policeman of the Middle East, more or less, has more to do with making Japan and some other countries feel that their oil flow is assured ... so that they don't then feel more need to create a great power, armed forces, and security doctrine, and you don't start getting a lot of great powers with conflicting interests sending their militaries all over the world."

Despite its sometimes esoteric logic, America's strategy of preponderance is seductive. In the abstract it makes sense that the United States should seek to amass as much power as possible. In this way the rationale behind U.S. strategy is analogous to that of a firm in an oligopolistic market, which drives its rivals out of business rather than risk its profits in a competitive environment. Theoretically, if a state can establish—and maintain—itself as the only great power in the international system, it will enjoy something very close to absolute security. But as history amply shows, when one state acquires too much power, others invariably fear that it will aggrandize itself at their expense.

"Hegemonic empires," Henry Kissinger recently noted, "almost automatically elicit universal resistance, which is why all such claimants have sooner or later exhausted themselves."

More than two hundred years ago Edmund Burke warned his countrymen,

Among precautions against ambition it may not be amiss to take one precaution against our *own* ... I dread our being too much dreaded ... We may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard-of power. But every nation will think we shall abuse it ... Sooner or later, this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin.

Like some optimistic Britons in the late eighteenth century, many American strategists today assert that the United States, the only superpower, is a "benevolent" hegemon, immunized from a backlash against its preponderance by what they call its "soft power"—that is, by the attractiveness of its liberal-democratic ideology and its open, syncretic culture. Washington also believes that others don't fear U.S. geopolitical pre-eminence because they know the United States will use its unprecedented power to promote the good of the international system rather than to advance its own selfish aims.

But states must always be more concerned with a predominant power's capabilities than with its intentions, and in fact well before September 11—indeed, throughout most of the past decade—other states have been profoundly anxious about the *imbalance* of power in America's favor. This simmering mistrust of U.S. predominance intensified during the Clinton Administration, as other states responded to American hegemony by concerting their efforts against it. Russia and China, although long estranged, found common ground in a nascent alliance that opposed U.S. "hegemonism" and expressly aimed at re-establishing "a multipolar world." Arguing that the term "superpower" is inadequate to convey the true extent of America's economic and military pre-eminence, the French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine called the United States a "hyperpower." Even the Dutch Prime Minister declared that the European Union should make itself "a counterweight to the United States."

American intervention in Kosovo crystallized fears of U.S. hegemony, prompting the emergence of an anti-U.S. constellation of China, Russia, and India. Viewing the Kosovo war as a dangerous precedent establishing Washington's self-declared right to interfere in other countries' internal affairs, and asserting their support for a multipolar world, these three states increased their arms transfers and their sharing of military technology, specifically to counter American power. Also, the Kosovo conflict made apparent the disparity between America's geopolitical power and Europe's, inciting Europe to take its first serious steps toward redressing that disparity by acquiring—through the European Defense and Security Identity—the kinds of military capabilities it would need to act independent of the United States. If the European Union fulfills EDSI's longer-term

goals, it will emerge as an unfettered strategic player in world politics. And that emergence will have been driven by the clear objective of investing Europe with the capability to act as a brake on America's aspirations.

Any remaining doubt that American hegemony could trigger a hostile reaction, whether reasonable or not, surely dissipated on September 11. The role the United States has assigned itself in the Persian Gulf has made it—not Japan, not the states of Western Europe, not China—vulnerable to a backlash. Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan resent America's intrusion into regional affairs. The widespread perception within the region that the Middle East has long been a victim of "Western imperialism" of course exacerbates this animosity. Moreover, aggrieved groups throughout the Middle East contest the legitimacy of the regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Gulf emirates which the United States is compelled to support, making America even more of a lightning rod for the politically disaffected. In this sense Osama bin Laden's brand of terrorism (which aims to compel the United States to remove its military forces from the Persian Gulf, and to replace America's client, the Saudi monarchy, with a fundamentalist Islamic government) dramatically illustrates U.S. vulnerability to the kind of "asymmetric warfare" of which some defense experts have warned.

The rise of new great powers is inevitable, and America's very primacy accelerates this process. If Washington continues to follow an adult-supervision strategy, which treats its "allies" as irresponsible adolescents and China and Russia as future enemies to be suppressed, its relations with these emerging great powers will be increasingly dangerous, as they coalesce against what they perceive as an American threat. But that is not even the worst conceivable outcome. What if a sullen and resentful China were to align itself with Islamic fundamentalist groups? Such a situation is hardly beyond the realm of possibility; partners form alliances not because they are friends, or because they have common values, but because they fear someone else more than they fear each other.

A strategy of preponderance is burdensome, Sisyphean, and profoundly risky. It is therefore time for U.S. policymakers to adopt a very different grand strategy: one that might be called offshore balancing. Rather than fear multipolarity, this strategy embraces it. It recognizes that instability—caused by the rise and fall of great powers, great-power rivalries, and messy regional conflicts—is a geopolitical fact of life. Offshore balancing accepts that the United States cannot prevent the rise of new great powers, either within the present American sphere (the European Union, Germany, Japan) or outside it (China, a resurgent Russia). Instead of exhausting its resources and drawing criticism or worse by keeping these entities weak, the United States would allow them to develop their militaries to provide for their own national and regional security. Among themselves, then,

these states would maintain power balances, check the rise of overly ambitious global and regional powers, and stabilize Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf. It would naturally be in their interests to do so.

It's always safest and cheapest to get others to stabilize the turbulent regions of the globe. Historically, however, this has seldom been an option, because if one lives in a dangerous neighborhood, one must be prepared to protect oneself from troublemakers rather than relying on someone else to do so. In fact, the only two great powers in modern history that successfully devolved onto others the responsibility for maintaining regional stability are Britain during its great-power heyday (1700–1914) and the United States (until 1945). They were able to do so because they had moats—a narrow one for England, and two very big ones for the United States—that kept predatory Eurasian great powers at bay.

As offshore balancers, Britain and the United States reaped enormous strategic dividends. While they were shielded from threatening states by geography, London and Washington could afford to maintain militaries smaller than those of Continental powers, and concentrate instead on getting rich. Often they could stay out of Europe's turmoil entirely, gaining in strength as other great powers fought debilitating wars. And even in wartime offshore balancers have enjoyed advantages that Continental powers have not. Instead of sending big armies to fight costly Continental wars, Britain, for instance, relied on its navy to blockade those states bidding for mastery of Europe and on its financial power to underwrite coalitions against them, and stuck its allies with the greater part of the blood price of defeating those powers that aspired to dominate the Continent.

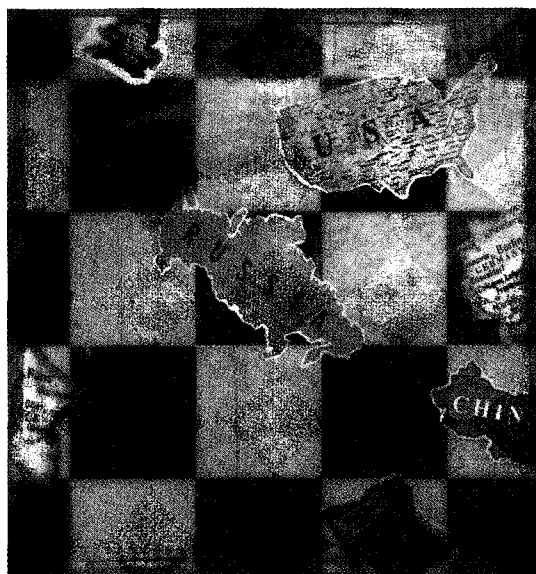
The United States, of course, followed a similar strategy during World War II. From 1940 to 1944 it confined its role in the European war to providing economic assistance and munitions to the Soviet Union and Britain and—after entering the war, in December of 1941—to relatively low-cost strategic air bombardment of Germany, and peripheral land campaigns in North Africa and Italy. The United States was more than happy to delay the invasion of Europe until June of 1944. By then the Red Army—which inflicted about 88 percent of the Wehrmacht's casualties throughout the war—had mortally weakened Germany, but at a staggering cost.

Taken together, the experiences of Britain and America highlight the central feature of the offshore balancing strategy: it allows for burden *shifting*, rather than burden sharing. Offshore balancers can afford to be bystanders in the open-

ing stages of conflict. Because the security of others is most immediately at risk, an offshore balancer can be confident that those others will attempt to defend themselves. Often they will do so expeditiously, obviating the offshore balancer's intervention. If, on the other hand, a predominant power seems to be winning, an offshore balancer can intervene decisively to forestall its victory (as Britain did against Philip II, Louis XIV, and Napoleon). And if the offshore balancer must intervene, the state aspiring to dominance will already have been at least somewhat bloodied, and thus not as formidable as it was for those who had the geopolitical misfortune to constitute the first line of defense.

The same dynamics apply—or would, if the United States gave them a chance—in regional conflicts, although not quite as dramatically. Great powers that border restive neighbors, or that are economically dependent on unstable regions, have a much larger interest than does the United States in policing those areas. Most regional power balances

(the relative positions of, say, Hungary and Romania, or of one sub-Saharan state and another) need not concern the United States. America must intervene only to prevent a single power from dominating a strategically crucial area—and then only if the efforts of great powers with a larger stake in that region have failed to redress the imbalance. So for an offshore balancing strategy to work, the world must be multipolar—that is, there must be several other great powers, and major regional powers as well, onto which the United States can shift the burden of



maintaining stability in various parts of the world.

For America the most important grand-strategic issue is what relations it will have with these new great powers. In fostering a multipolar world—in which the foreign and national-security policies of the emerging great powers will be largely devoted to their rivalries with one another and to quelling and containing regional instability—an offshore balancing strategy is, of course, opportunistic and self-serving. But it also exercises restraint and shows geopolitical respect. By abandoning the “preponderance” strategy's extravagant objectives, the United States can minimize the risks of open confrontation with the new great powers.

Although jockeying for advantage is a fact of life for great powers, coexistence, and even cooperation between and among them, is not unusual. Offshore balancing seeks to promote America's relative power and security, but it also aims to maximize the opportunity for the United States to be on decent terms with the other great powers. In this

sense the strategy has much in common with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's vision of détente. That policy was a significant departure from previous Cold War approaches, in that the United States explicitly recognized the Soviet Union as a collaborator in, rather than a challenger to, the effort to maintain the stability of the international system. To understand this dramatic shift, contrast the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy, in which that paragon of Cold War liberalism advanced the stirring but rather dangerous notion that in the struggle with communism the United States would "pay any price, bear any burden," with Nixon's first inaugural address, which promulgated the realistic but conciliatory message that "we cannot expect to make everyone our friend, but we can try to make

no one our enemy." This was détente's animating sentiment.

Détente was based on the assumption (hardly contested at the time) that the USSR wouldn't go away. Because the superpower rivalry could not be resolved without destroying humanity, there was, as Kissinger declared, "no alternative to coexistence." Détente, then, was a strategy for managing a permanent relationship. In what Nixon and Kissinger hoped would evolve into a mature relationship, Moscow and Washington would acknowledge each other's legitimate interests and try not to allow disagreements to poison accommodations. Détente was a shift in style with substance—or, rather, a shift in style with substantive consequences. The Soviets and the Chinese were to be approached not as alien ideologies but as intelligent adults with whom the United States should find a substantial area of common interest.

Similarly, an offshore balancing strategy would dictate that in order to coexist with the emerging great powers, or even to enjoy cooperative ties with them (in efforts to combat Islamic terrorism, for instance), the United States must start treating such powers like fellow adults. This would mean both accepting them as peers and acknowledging the legitimacy of their national interests. In concrete terms, here is how an offshore balancing strategy would apply to particular cases.

- Today, not for the first time in its history, Russia is down and out as a great power. But it has come back before and probably will do so again. Moreover, for the United States, Russia is crucial as a potential ally in three regions: Europe (vis-à-vis a European "superstate," or Germany if the EU project fails), East Asia (vis-à-vis China), and the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. As an offshore balancer, the United States would abandon plans for NATO expansion (which Russia regards as a strategic threat), and if Washington decides to undertake a national missile-defense program, it would follow through on the recent agreement to make deep cuts in its strategic nuclear arsenal to reassure Russia and China that it doesn't seek to gain a first-strike advantage. It would allow Russia to supervise its legitimate sphere of influence—in Chechnya and in Central Asia, where it is combating Islamic fundamentalists, as well as in parts of Eastern Europe and in the states that formerly composed the Soviet Union. America's direct sphere of influence embraces the area from the Canadian Arctic to Tierra del Fuego and from Greenland to Guam. Surely we can tolerate other great powers' enjoying spheres of influence in their own parts of the world.

- With respect to China, the United States would recognize that the Taiwan issue is an internal Chinese matter. Taiwan's unresolved status is a legacy of the civil war that ended on the mainland in 1949. It is worth recalling that before the outbreak of the Korean War, Secretary of State Dean Acheson advised that the United States should extricate itself from the unfinished business of the Chinese civil war and leave Taiwan to its fate. A half century later it is time for the United States finally to do so. Washington

WHEREVER

you are in the
world, you

could no longer
call him a boy,

the one who
squats, hovering

like a cloud above
his own reflection

in rain pooled by
a mound of debris

once his neighborhood
where a hand, not

his own, lies
half closed, as if

beckoning,
half open, as if

letting go.

—WILLIAM PITT ROOT

would also fundamentally re-examine its notion of what constitutes a “China threat.” That China, the largest and potentially most powerful state in East Asia, would seek a more assertive political, economic, and military role in the region—and would even want to end America’s current strategic superiority there—hardly meets that threshold (although it is no doubt alarming to China’s immediate neighbors). The United States should also mute its criticism of China’s human-rights policy. Washington simply can’t transform China into a liberal, free-market democracy, and U.S. pressure only exacerbates the friction in Sino-American relations. Generally, an offshore balancing strategy would hold that fatalism should replace idealism in America’s attitude toward what used to be called the internal arrangements of other countries. It would also hold that our pragmatic policy choices, born of self-interest, should be embraced as such, and not clothed in altruism or idealism. Seeking to engender changes in other nations’ fundamental values so that they resemble America’s is an unreasonable goal of foreign policy. An offshore balancing strategy would accept other nations for what they are, or what their history has made them.

- With respect to Europe, the United States would endorse the EU’s efforts—which Washington now opposes—to acquire the military capabilities it needs to defend its interests independent of the United States. At the same time, the United States would begin a phased withdrawal from its European security commitments. To be sure, many U.S. policymakers have argued that the Europeans have demonstrated their incapacity (during the Balkan crises, for instance) to act effectively without U.S. “leadership.” But these protests are hypocritical—who can blame the Europeans for their inability to assert themselves in security affairs when Washington has for decades repeatedly squelched European initiatives that would have made that assertion possible? An offshore balancing strategy would hold that America’s strategic interest in Europe does not demand that Washington insure against every untoward event there. Disorder in the Balkans and other places on Europe’s fringes should be a matter for Europeans, who have the wherewithal to combat it, quarantine it, or, if they choose, ignore it. The United States would follow a similar policy with respect to Japan. Washington would announce to Tokyo its intention to terminate the Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty within a specified time period (say, five years), at the end of which Japan, for more than fifty years a politically stable state, would have developed whatever military means it believes necessary to function as an independent great power. An offshore balancing strategy would turn on a simple truth: other states have at least as much interest as the United States does in secure sea-lanes, access to resources, and regional stability. The less America does, and the less others expect it to do, the more other states will do to help themselves.

Recognizing the legitimacy of other great powers’ spheres of influence offers the United States a further strategic advantage. The Persian Gulf and Central Asia show why. Russia and China both are profoundly concerned about the spread of Islamic fundamentalism on their peripheries. In Chechnya, in Central Asia (where Russian troops help to defend the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), and in the Caucasus, Moscow has fought major military campaigns to protect its southern flank against militant Islam. China, too, is combating terrorism fomented by Islamic separatists, in the Xinjiang province. Last June, Beijing and Moscow entered into a security relationship, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (which also embraces three of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia), to coordinate efforts to combat the common threat to their security posed by these Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups—groups linked to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden. Similarly, India, a possible future great power, has been battling Islamic terrorists who are waging a proxy war on Pakistan’s behalf to wrest the disputed province of Kashmir away from New Delhi. Simply put, for reasons of security and access to oil, Russia, China, India, Western Europe, and Japan have strong reasons—stronger than America’s—to pacify Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. By adopting an offshore balancing strategy, the United States will compel them to do so.

Passing the buck would help the United States out of the impasse that securing Afghanistan promises to be. The political and military challenges the war poses underscore how difficult and costly will be the effort to restore order in the country and the region when the fighting stops. When the United States has achieved its military goals in Afghanistan, it should announce a phased withdrawal from its security commitments in the region, shifting to others the hard job of stabilizing it.

The complexities involved in that job are numerous. Washington’s very strategy of primacy, and America’s concomitant military presence in the region, are in themselves a source of instability, especially for the regimes on which the United States relies. The regimes in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, for instance, face doubtful prospects precisely because their close connection to Washington intensifies radical nationalist and Islamic fundamentalist opposition within those countries. For this reason none of the regional regimes in the current coalition can be especially dependable allies. Only with enormous pressure did a few of them even allow American forces to conduct offensive strikes on Afghanistan from bases on their territory. And fearing that popular anger at the U.S. military campaign will trigger domestic political explosions, many of these states pressed Washington to bring an early end to the war.

If America remains in the region indefinitely, it will have to prop up these unpopular or failing regimes. In Saudi Arabia the United States could easily find itself militarily

involved if internal upheaval threatens the monarchy's hold on power. To forestall economic collapse in Pakistan, Washington will have to donate billions of dollars in direct and indirect assistance. Finally, if the United States continues to play the role of regional gendarme, it will assume the thankless—and probably hopeless—burden of trying to put Afghanistan together again. Divided along ethnic, linguistic, and clan fault lines, the various factions inside Afghanistan cannot agree on that country's future political organization. (The forces making up the anti-Taliban contingent seem only to agree that they resent U.S. bombing of their country.) That the outside powers have conflicting goals for Afghanistan's future further complicates any sorting out of Afghanistan's political structure. If ever there was a place where America should devolve security responsibilities to others, it is the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia region. Again, Western Europe, Japan, Russia, China, and India all have greater security and economic interests in the region than does the United States, and if America pulls out, they will police it because they must.

Rather than attempt to impose a Pax Americana on this endemically turbulent area, the United States should devote the resources it currently spends on this costly and dangerous job to rendering the region economically and strategically irrelevant. That is, America should pursue a national energy policy that would develop alternative sources of energy for the United States and, more important, the rest of the industrialized world. This colossal scientific and industrial effort should be our highest national-security priority (see "Mideast Oil Forever?" by Joseph J. Romm and Charles B. Curtis, April, 1996, *Atlantic*). If the United States shifts responsibility for stabilizing the region to the other great powers, the real price of Persian Gulf oil will become extremely high for them. It would then be in their interests to pool resources and expertise with America in what would amount to an international Manhattan Project to obviate the need for that oil—thus dramatically reducing the revenue streams to the regimes in Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Doing so is surely a common international interest. If Washington were to spend the approximately \$106 billion that—according to Earl Ravenal, a former Pentagon analyst—it is devoting this year to defending the Persian Gulf region, and if Western Europe, Japan, China, and Russia were to kick in what they would otherwise spend on policing the region, it's hard to imagine that this goal couldn't be achieved.

Some will assert, correctly, that if it abjures a strategy of preponderance, America will sacrifice some of the awe with which it is viewed by the world. But less awe and less influence will bring the United States more security. Some will object that the policy we advocate shuns the inspiring role of America as "the indispensable nation." But such a

grandiose vision, while pleasing to our image of ourselves, is the antithesis of statecraft, which must be guided by discrimination on the basis of power, interest, and circumstance. Historically, the most imaginative statesmen and policies have hardly been visionary. For centuries, with flexibility and subtlety, British diplomats pursued a grand strategy that aimed at nothing more inspiring than ensuring a balance of power among the states of Western Europe. This was really just tactical fine-tuning on a grand scale, and so aroused the consternation of idealists of every stripe. For their part, America's nineteenth-century statesmen could not have been less idealistic or more pragmatic as they, by adroitly exploiting European great-power rivalries, maneuvered the British, the French, and the Spanish out of North America and established American predominance in the Western Hemisphere—probably the most stunning diplomatic achievement of modern history, and the very model of a successful multipolar strategy.

The policy we advocate is informed by the conviction that history is "just one damned thing after another"; we see no end to power politics. And we hold that the purpose of grand strategy isn't the pursuit of new world orders but simply making the best of bad choices—to use the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott's metaphor, keeping afloat in "a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbor for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting point nor appointed destination." Ours is a grand strategy for the long haul—and so, by the lights of visionaries who see foreign policy as a means of pursuing millennialist goals, not a very grand one. But the grander its foreign-policy vision, the more a state is trapped in the tyranny of its own construct: although recent administrations display an odd compulsion to devise and promulgate such visions of America's role in the world, those visions are in fact incompatible with the push and pull of strategy.

Finally, although some might characterize an offshore balancing strategy as isolationist, it emphatically is not. Rather, its guiding principle is a clear-eyed realism. It is a workaday policy—pragmatic, flexible, and opportunistic. But it will also bring America into a more respectful and natural relationship with the other great powers, as the United States forsakes the temptations of hegemony. "A mature great power will make measured and limited use of its power," Walter Lippmann wrote in 1965.

It will eschew the theory of a global and universal duty, which not only commits it to unending wars of intervention, but intoxicates its thinking with the illusion that it is a crusader for righteousness ... I am in favor of learning to behave like a great power, of getting rid of the globalism, which would not only entangle us everywhere, but is based on the totally vain notion that if we do not set the world in order, no matter what the price, we cannot live in the world safely ... In the real world, we shall have to learn to live as a great power which defends itself and makes its way among other great powers. ▀

WHAT WENT WRONG?

By all standards of the modern world—economic development, literacy, scientific achievement—Muslim civilization, once a mighty enterprise, has fallen low. Many in the Middle East blame a variety of outside forces. But underlying much of the Muslim world's travail may be a simple lack of freedom

BY BERNARD LEWIS

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In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear that things had gone badly wrong in the Middle East—and, indeed, in all the lands of Islam. Compared with Christendom, its rival for more than a millennium, the world of Islam had become poor, weak, and ignorant. The primacy and therefore the dominance of the West was clear for all to see, invading every aspect of the Muslim's public and even—more painfully—his private life.

Muslim modernizers—by reform or revolution—concentrated their efforts in three main areas: military, economic, and political. The results achieved were, to say the least, disappointing. The quest for victory by updated armies brought a series of humiliating defeats. The quest for prosperity through development brought in some countries impoverished and corrupt economies in recurring need of external aid, in others an unhealthy dependence on a single resource—oil. And even this was discovered, extracted, and put to use by Western ingenuity and industry, and is doomed, sooner or later, to be exhausted, or, more probably, superseded, as the international community grows weary of a fuel that pollutes the land, the sea, and the air wherever it is used or transported, and that puts the world economy at the mercy of a clique of capricious autocrats. Worst of all are the political results: the long quest for freedom has left a string of shabby tyrannies, ranging from traditional autocracies to dictatorships that are modern only in their apparatus of repression and indoctrination.

Many remedies were tried—weapons and factories, schools and parliaments—but none achieved the desired result. Here and there they brought some alleviation and, to limited elements of the population, some benefit. But they failed to remedy or even to halt the increasing im-



balance between Islam and the Western world.

There was worse to come. It was bad enough for Muslims to feel poor and weak after centuries of being rich and strong, to lose the position of leadership that they had come to regard as their right, and to be reduced to the role of followers of the West. But the twentieth century, particularly the second half, brought further humiliation—the awareness that they were no longer even the first among followers but were falling back in a lengthening line of eager and more successful West-

ernizers, notably in East Asia. The rise of Japan had been an encouragement but also a reproach. The later rise of other Asian economic powers brought only reproach. The proud heirs of ancient civilizations had gotten used to hiring Western firms to carry out tasks of which their own contractors and technicians were apparently incapable. Now Middle Eastern rulers and businessmen found themselves inviting contractors and technicians from Korea—only recently emerged from Japanese colonial rule—to perform these tasks. Following is bad enough; limping in the rear is far worse. By all the standards that matter in the modern world—economic development and job creation, literacy, educational and scientific achievement, political freedom and respect for human rights—what was once a mighty civilization has indeed fallen low.

“Who did this to us?” is of course a common human response when things are going badly, and many in the Middle East, past and present, have asked this question. They have found several different answers. It is usually easier and always more satisfying to blame others for one's misfortunes. For a long time the Mongols were the favorite villains. The Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century were blamed for the destruction of both Muslim power and Islamic civilization, and

for what was seen as the ensuing weakness and stagnation. But after a while historians, Muslims and others, pointed to two flaws in this argument. The first was that some of the greatest cultural achievements of Islam, notably in Iran, came after, not before, the Mongol invasions. The second, more difficult to accept but nevertheless undeniable, was that the Mongols overthrew an empire that was already fatally weakened; indeed, it is hard to see how the once mighty empire of the caliphs would otherwise have succumbed to a horde of nomadic horsemen riding across the steppes from East Asia.

The rise of nationalism—itsself an import from Europe—produced new perceptions. Arabs could lay the blame for their troubles on the Turks, who had ruled them for many centuries. Turks could lay the blame for the stagnation of their civilization on the dead weight of the Arab past, in which the creative energies of the Turkish people were caught and immobilized. Persians could lay the blame for the loss of their ancient glories on Arabs, Turks, and Mongols impartially.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries British and French paramountcy in much of the Arab world produced a new and more plausible scapegoat—Western imperialism. In the Middle East there have been good reasons for such blame. Western political domination, economic penetration, and—longest, deepest, and most insidious of all—cultural influence changed the face of the region and transformed the lives of its people, turning them in new directions, arousing new hopes and fears, creating new dangers and new expectations without precedent in their cultural past.

But the Anglo-French interlude was comparatively brief, and ended half a century ago; Islam's change for the worse began long before and continued unabated afterward. Inevitably, the role of the British and the French as villains was taken over by the United States, along with other aspects of Western leadership. The attempt to transfer the guilt to America has won considerable support but, for similar reasons, remains unconvincing. Anglo-French rule and American influence, like the Mongol invasions, were a consequence, not a cause, of the inner weakness of Middle Eastern states and societies. Some observers, both inside and outside the region, have pointed to differences in the post-colonial development of former British possessions—for example, between Aden, in the Middle East, and Singapore or Hong Kong; or between the various lands that once made up the British Empire in India.

Another European contribution to this debate is anti-Semitism, and blaming “the Jews” for all that goes wrong. Jews in traditional Islamic societies experienced the normal constraints and occasional hazards of minority status. Until the rise and spread of Western tolerance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they were better off under Muslim than under Christian rule in most significant respects. With rare exceptions, where hostile stereotypes of the Jew existed in the Islamic tradition, Islamic societies tended to be contemptuous and dismissive rather than suspicious and obsessive. This made the events of 1948—the failure to prevent the

establishment of the state of Israel—all the more of a shock. As some writers observed at the time, it was humiliating enough to be defeated by the great imperial powers of the West; to suffer the same fate at the hands of a contemptible gang of Jews was intolerable. Anti-Semitism and its image of the Jew as a scheming, evil monster provided a soothing antidote.

The earliest specifically anti-Semitic statements in the Middle East occurred among Christian minorities, and can usually be traced back to European originals. They had limited impact; during the Dreyfus trial in France, for example, when a Jewish officer was unjustly accused and condemned by a hostile court, Muslim comments usually favored the persecuted Jew against his Christian persecutors. But the poison continued to spread, and starting in 1933, Nazi Germany and its various agencies made a concerted and on the whole remarkably successful effort to promote European-style anti-Semitism in the Arab world. The struggle for Palestine greatly facilitated the acceptance of the anti-Semitic interpretation of history, and led some to attribute all evil in the Middle East—and, indeed, in the world—to secret Jewish plots. This interpretation has pervaded much of the public discourse in the region, including that seen in education, the media, and even entertainment.

An argument sometimes adduced is that the cause of the changed relationship between East and West is not a Middle Eastern decline but a Western upsurge—the discoveries and the scientific, technological, industrial, and political revolutions that transformed the West and vastly increased its wealth and power. But this is merely to restate the question: Why did the discoverers of America sail from Spain rather than from a Muslim Atlantic port, out of which such voyages were indeed attempted in earlier times? Why did the great scientific breakthrough occur in Europe and not, as one might reasonably have expected, in the richer, more advanced, and in most respects more enlightened realm of Islam?

A more sophisticated form of the blame game finds its targets inside, rather than outside, Islamic society. One such target is religion—for some, specifically Islam. But to blame Islam as such is usually hazardous and not often attempted. Nor is it very plausible. For most of the Middle Ages it was neither the older cultures of the Orient nor the newer cultures of the West that were the major centers of civilization and progress but the world of Islam. There old sciences were recovered and developed and new sciences were created; there new industries were born and manufactures and commerce were expanded to a level without precedent. There, too, governments and societies achieved a freedom of thought and expression that led persecuted Jews and even dissident Christians to flee Christendom for refuge in Islam. In comparison with modern ideals, and even with modern practice in the more advanced democracies, the medieval Islamic world offered only limited freedom, but that was vastly more than was offered by any of its predecessors, its contemporaries, or most of its successors.

The point has often been made: If Islam is an obstacle to freedom, to science, to economic development, how is it that Muslim society in the past was a pioneer in all three—and this when Muslims were much closer in time to the sources and inspiration of their faith than they are now? Some have posed the question in a different form—not “What has Islam done to the Muslims?” but “What have the Muslims done to Islam?”—and have answered by laying the blame on specific teachers and doctrines and groups.

For those known nowadays as Islamists or fundamentalists, the failures and shortcomings of modern Islamic lands afflict those lands because they adopted alien notions and practices. They fell away from authentic Islam and thus lost their former greatness. Those known as modernists or reformers take the opposite view, seeing the cause of this loss not in the abandonment but in the retention of old ways, and especially in the inflexibility and ubiquity of the Islamic clergy, who, they say, are responsible for the persistence of beliefs and practices that might have been creative and progressive a thousand years ago but are neither today. The modernists’ usual tactic is not to denounce religion as such, still less Islam in particular, but to level their criticism against fanaticism. It is to fanaticism—and more particularly to fanatical religious authorities—that they attribute the stifling of the once great Islamic scientific movement and, more generally, of the freedom of thought and expression.

A more common approach to this theme has been to discuss a specific problem: the place of religion and of its professional exponents in the political order. In this view a principal cause of Western progress is the separation of Church and State and the creation of a civil society governed by secular laws. Another approach has been to view the main culprit as the relegation of women to an inferior position in Muslim society, which deprives the Islamic world of the talents and energies of half its people and entrusts the other half’s crucial early years of upbringing to illiterate and downtrodden mothers. The products of such an education, it has been said, are likely to grow up either arrogant or submissive, and unfit for a free, open society. However one evaluates the views of secularists and feminists, their success or failure will be a major factor in shaping the Middle Eastern future.

Some solutions that once commanded passionate support have been discarded. The two dominant movements in the twentieth century were socialism and nationalism. Both have been discredited—the first by its failure, the second by its success and consequent exposure as ineffective. Freedom, interpreted to mean national independence, was seen as the great talisman that would bring all other benefits. The overwhelming majority of Muslims now live in independent states, but this has brought no solutions to their problems. National socialism, the bastard offspring of both ideologies, persists in a few states that have preserved the Nazi-Fascist style of dictatorial government and indoctrination through a vast security apparatus and a single all-powerful party. These regimes

have failed every test except survival, and have brought none of the promised benefits. If anything, their infrastructures are even more antiquated than those of other Muslim states, their armed forces designed primarily for terror and repression.

At present two answers to the question of what went wrong command widespread support in the Middle East, each with its own diagnosis and corresponding prescription. One attributes all evil to the abandonment of the divine heritage of Islam and advocates return to a real or imagined past. That is the way of the Iranian revolution and of the so-called fundamentalist movements and regimes in various Muslim countries. The other condemns the past and advocates secular democracy, best embodied in the Turkish Republic, proclaimed in 1923 by Kemal Atatürk.

For the oppressive but ineffectual governments that rule much of the Middle East, finding targets to blame serves a useful, indeed an essential, purpose—to explain the poverty that they have failed to alleviate and to justify the tyranny that they have introduced. They seek to deflect the mounting anger of their unhappy subjects toward other, outside targets.

But growing numbers of Middle Easterners are adopting a more self-critical approach. The question “Who did this to us?” has led only to neurotic fantasies and conspiracy theories. And the question “What did we do wrong?” has led naturally to a second question: “How do we put it right?” In that question, and in the various answers that are being found, lie the best hopes for the future.

During the past few weeks the worldwide exposure given to the views and actions of Osama bin Laden and his hosts the Taliban has provided a new and vivid insight into the eclipse of what was once the greatest, most advanced, and most open civilization in human history.

To a Western observer, schooled in the theory and practice of Western freedom, it is precisely the lack of freedom—freedom of the mind from constraint and indoctrination, to question and inquire and speak; freedom of the economy from corrupt and pervasive mismanagement; freedom of women from male oppression; freedom of citizens from tyranny—that underlies so many of the troubles of the Muslim world. But the road to democracy, as the Western experience amply demonstrates, is long and hard, full of pitfalls and obstacles.

If the peoples of the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber may become a metaphor for the whole region, and there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression, culminating sooner or later in yet another alien domination—perhaps from a new Europe reverting to old ways, perhaps from a resurgent Russia, perhaps from some expanding superpower in the East. But if they can abandon grievance and victimhood, settle their differences, and join their talents, energies, and resources in a common creative endeavor, they can once again make the Middle East, in modern times as it was in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, a major center of civilization. For the time being, the choice is theirs. ▀

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO OSAMA BIN LADEN

To Western ears, the author writes, the public utterances of Osama bin Laden have always come across like the "tirades of a loony ideologue." But these skillful rhetorical constructions, rich in historical allusion, have enormous powers of penetration—and will survive their author

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

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Osama bin Laden has established himself as one of the most momentous figures in contemporary Islamic history, etching into the Western psyche, not to mention the Muslim one, the rhetoric of *jihad* against "Jewish and Christian Crusaders." We may never know when the Maktab al-Khidamat, or "Office of Services"—a holy-war clearinghouse for several thousand ragtag Arab volunteers in the Soviet-Afghan War—evolved into the highly organized anti-American terrorist group known as al Qaeda. Bin Laden's greatest achievement—the creation of a worldwide network of warrior cells—will outlive bin Laden unless the United States physically eliminates al Qaeda's entire command structure.

Bin Laden's *jihad* will be harder to deal with spiritually and intellectually. Through the power of their own bitter, angry faith, bin Laden and his followers have melted skyscrapers and crippled an American warship. For holy warriors, who live to die, these are inspiring achievements. Just as important, bin Laden and his followers have left a written corpus that is likely to motivate the faithful for years to come.

Like the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, of Iran, Osama bin Laden made his anti-Western passion and plans clear in print years before gaining prominence through a frontal assault against America and its friends. *The Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad*, a multivolume guide to paramilitary and terrorist activity, written by his followers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, signaled bin Laden's intention to wage an anti-



Western campaign far beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The encyclopedia was probably compiled and published in Peshawar, Pakistan, in late 1992. Because it doesn't provide a date or an exact place of printing (an intentional wartime evasiveness pervades the writing), one must make guesses about its provenance based on the text and on conversations with Pakistanis, Afghans, and Arabs. The encyclopedia, "one of the Sources of Energy for the faithful," was designed to transfer the knowledge and spirit gained from the "first brick of Islamic justice"—the successful war against Soviet communism—to a larger, more important campaign against the West, which bin Laden's statements have referred to only as *kufir* ("unbelief"), a classical-Islamic way of denoting geography by faith. The next *jihad* against America and its Muslim allies would, the authors of the encyclopedia prayed, lead to "the establishment of a castle of the Muslims, a [new] Caliphate"—a reference to the ruling politico-religious office of Islam's "golden age." For many fundamentalists, if not for the common man, the caliphate remains, at least sentimentally, the ideal geopolitical expression of Muslim universalism—an empire free of Westernized nation-states, where the *shari'a*, the holy law, reigns supreme, thus guaranteeing the union of Church and State and the brotherhood and strength of the faithful.

The aim of the encyclopedia and many smaller paramilitary and terrorist manuals that have appeared since 1992 is to democratize terrorism, to give to any true believer a portable guide to waging holy war worldwide. The encyclopedia has

been found in print or on CD-ROM wherever al Qaeda has sent its cadres. Bin Laden and his followers also sought to accomplish philosophically what the Shi'ite Ayatollah Khomeini aspired to but never achieved: taking Islamic radicalism mainstream by forcing and dominating the discussion of holy war among the various strains of Sunni fundamentalism, which has become a significant force in every Middle Eastern country. Though unquestionably the most influential Muslim of modern times, Khomeini could never transcend the seventh-century division of Islamic society into those who recognize the legitimacy of the caliphal succession to the Prophet Muhammad (the Sunnis) and "the party of Ali" (the Shi'a), who believe that only Muhammad's son-in-law and his descendants can rightfully rule the Islamic world.

After September 11 bin Laden and the Arabic-speaking spokesmen of the Taliban tried, through the Gulf-based satellite-television channel Al Jazeera and through sympathetic partisans elsewhere on the ground, to make vivid the Muslim history of 300 years of defeat at the hands of Christians and Jews preceded by a thousand years of triumphs. Bin Laden's effort has been much more successful than that of Khomeini, whose charisma had a distinctly Shi'ite, messianic core, at gaining a foothold in the Sunni community, which comprises around 90 percent of the world's Muslims. A wealthy man who chose hardship in Afghanistan, a "persecuted" man who repeatedly fled countries to escape the hostility of Americans and their Middle Eastern allies, bin Laden evokes the prophetic tradition. Muhammad, too, was a well-off man; he had to forsake his native Mecca owing to the hostility of infidels and faithless members of his own tribe. His *hijra* ("emigration" or "flight") was arduous and perilous, but he was, as every faithful Muslim knows in detail, eventually victorious—in the hearts and minds of his followers, and then on the battlefield.

Bin Laden's criticisms of the West, and America in particular, can easily appear to a Westerner as the tirades of a loony ideologue with a Leninist capacity to sublimate slaughter through a testament of faith. To embittered Muslims, however, his image is far more complicated. It is seen in the context of a civilizational tug-of-war that began in the seventh century, when Arab Muslim armies invaded Byzantine Palestine. And his ideas will survive martyrdom.

Osama bin Laden's initial calculation was simple: that the anti-Western (for "Western" it is actually more meaningful to use the term he sometimes employs, "Judeo-Christian") baggage of 1,400 years would sufficiently neutralize the revulsion that Muslims might feel for terrorist tactics. His writings and communiqués have reminded Muslims "not to forget the dropping of the H bombs on cities with their entire populations of children, elderly, and women [and] ... the Christian Serbians who massacred and raped in a manner not seen in contemporary history ... [and the] massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, Philippines,

Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Eritrea, [and] Chechnya ... that sent shivers through the body and shake the conscience [all while] a clear conspiracy between the USA and its allies ... under the cover of the iniquitous United Nations [allowed it to happen]." The writings hammer home the suffering of the Iraqis, always citing a figure of 600,000 Iraqi children dead as a result of "the boycotts and sanctions against the Muslim Iraqi people." They call attention to the dictatorial regimes under which Muslims live and the friendly relations the United States has with their "moderate" rulers. They remind Muslims that Americans, like the Crusaders of old, aren't invincible. Here is how bin Laden once addressed U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, in his 1996 "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places":

Where was this courage of yours when the explosion in Beirut took place in 1983 ... You were transformed into scattered bits and pieces at that time; 241 soldiers were killed, most of them Marines. And where was this courage of yours when two explosions made you leave Aden in less than twenty-four hours! ... you moved tens of thousands of international forces, including twenty-eight thousand American soldiers, into Somalia. However, when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu, you left the area in disappointment, humiliation, and defeat, your dead with you ... It was a pleasure for the heart of every Muslim and a remedy to the chests of believing nations to see you defeated in the three Islamic cities of Beirut, Aden, and Mogadishu.

Fortunately, Sunni Muslims, who are, so to speak, the Roman Catholics of Islamic history, have never been particularly keen to embrace radical ideas en masse, let alone the ruthless violence that is an integral part of bin Laden's message. Historically, they have been uncomfortable with Saudi Wahhabism, the creed of bin Laden's homeland, a "purist" version of Islam that issued forth in the eighteenth century from the Hanbali school of legal thought, the last born and least fun of Sunni Islam's four schools of jurisprudence. The conquest in 1925 of Mecca and Medina, Islam's holiest cities, by the as-Sa'ud family, and the enormous oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, have tended to obscure the fact that the Saudi version of Islam is closer to Puritan Christianity than to the more tolerant and more widespread traditions of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Saudi Arabia, with its intrusive morals police, decidedly does not represent mainstream Islam.

Since September 11, though, perhaps a little too much has been made of Wahhabism in Western commentary. Bin Laden's vision was designed to appeal to the larger Muslim world. His primary target is the enemy without, the United States, not the enemy within, the "impious" Muslims. The goal is to unify Muslims, not to divide them by doctrine or even by the intensity of their faith. In the October–November, 1996, issue of *Nida'ul Islam* (*The Call of Islam*), a militant-Islamic magazine published in Australia, bin Laden said this

about the collective responsibility of the Muslim community against the Western threat:

What bears no doubt in this fierce Judeo-Christian campaign against the Muslim world, the likes of which has never been seen before, is that the Muslims must prepare all possible might to repel the enemy, militarily, economically, through missionary activity, and all other areas. It is crucial for us to be patient and to cooperate in righteousness and piety and to raise awareness of the fact that the highest priority, after faith, is to repel the aggressive enemy that corrupts the religion and the world. Nothing deserves a higher priority, after faith, as the religious scholars have declared. It is crucial to overlook many of the issues of bickering to unite our ranks so that we can repel the greater Kufr.

Even more practical and ecumenical were bin Laden's statements in his 1996 "Declaration," which was, to cite the Princeton historian Bernard Lewis, the first official "license to kill" Americans issued by bin Laden and al Qaeda. Those who think al Qaeda wouldn't ally with an irreligious Saddam Hussein or Iran's Shi'ite clerics should reflect on the following:

To repel the greatest of the two dangers at the expense of the lesser one is an Islamic principle which should be observed. It was the tradition of the people of the Sunnah to join and invade and fight with the righteous and non-righteous men. Allah may support this religion by righteous and non-righteous people as told by the Prophet ... If it is not possible to fight except with the help of non-righteous military personnel and commanders, then there are two possibilities: either fighting will be ignored and the others [the infidels], who are the great danger to this life and religion, will take control; or [we will have] to fight with the help of non-righteous rulers, thereby repelling the greatest of the two dangers and implementing most, though not all, of the Islamic laws. The latter option is the right duty to be carried out in these circumstances and in many other similar situations.

Bin Laden's militant-Islamic thought represents a fascinating mixture of several strands. To borrow the terminology of Olivier Roy, a French scholar of Islamic radicalism, it is in part "Islamist"; bin Laden has advocated overturning Islamic society politically by toppling or spiritually transforming (through intimidation) its leadership. But bin Laden has not wanted to fracture Islamic society, creating divisions among the faithful that could be exploited by the West or by pro-Western Muslims. Bin Laden's fear of religious division, or *fitna*, is perhaps the main reason why hatred of the Saudi royal family, which has committed the unforgivable sin of allowing U.S. soldiers on Saudi soil since 1990, has not turned into a violent campaign against the house of as-Sa'ud and its very bombable oil wells. In his "Declaration of War Against the Americans," bin Laden wrote,

I would like here to alert my brothers, the Mujahidin ["holy warriors"] ... to protect this (oil) wealth and not to include it in the battle, as it is a great Islamic wealth and a large economic power essential for the soon to be established Islamic state, by Allah's Permission and Grace. The existence of such a large country [Saudi Arabia] with its huge resources

under the leadership of the forthcoming Islamic State, by Allah's Grace, represents a serious danger to the very existence of the Zionist state in Palestine. The Noble Kaa'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims [that is, the direction to which Muslims pray], makes the land of the two Holy Places a symbol for the unity of the Islamic world ... An internal war [would be] a great mistake, no matter the reasons for it.

Bin Laden's rhetoric has not been heedless in its calls for suicide bombers; not every Muslim male need volunteer to vaporize himself for God's glory. Bin Laden was a businessman and a student of public administration and economics at King Abdul-Aziz University, in Jidda; his statements betray an awareness of the complexity of the modern state and the need for Muslims to keep working. He powerfully reproached the Saudis for the existence of so many jobless in the Muslim world's richest oil state.

Bin Laden's words have never drawn a detailed picture of the Islamic future; in this sense his vision should be characterized as what Roy calls "neofundamentalist," a vision alluring in its unprogrammatic simplicity and in its recourse to God and holy law to solve all problems. In bin Laden's view, Muslims should think first of their honor, of their historic pride in being a victorious people through countless difficult battles. It would be pointless for everyone to die in some cataclysmic struggle between good and evil. Rather, bin Laden's writings speak of "guerrilla war ... fast-moving, light forces that work under complete secrecy."

The leader of al Qaeda always wanted to be seen, above all else, as the Muslim world's anti-American paladin—fighting the good fight while putting few demands on, and making few serious threats against, the status quo in the Muslim world. No wonder America's Muslim allies, who successfully countered (often in draconian ways) fundamentalist opposition to their rule throughout the 1980s and 1990s, have not yet leaped enthusiastically to answer Washington's long-standing request for help. The war in Afghanistan certainly made real bin Laden's dream of becoming the focal point of Muslim conversation. But as the war wound on, bin Laden became angry that ordinary Muslims in the Middle East had not risen up more loudly in support of him and the Taliban.

Dealt a blow in Afghanistan, al Qaeda will call passionately for a new wave of terrorism against the United States. These battle cries will confront the profound conservatism of Sunni Muslim society, which has repeatedly denied glory to its radicals. The anti-Crusader rhetoric will also confront a reality vastly different from the one that shaped bin Laden's mind, and shaped the promises bin Laden made to his holy warriors. This time around, the Americans aren't running.

A good thing, too. In the years ahead bin Laden's followers throughout the Muslim world will continue to distribute, and add to, *The Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad*. Martyrdom will only enhance its cachet. The encyclopedia may serve, in effect, as Osama bin Laden's last will and testament, and his dreams will beckon from its pages. ▀

A NASTY BUSINESS

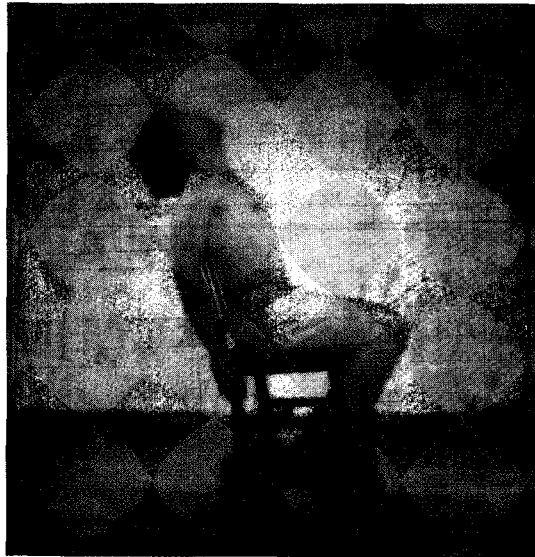
Gathering “good intelligence” against terrorists is an inherently brutish enterprise, involving methods a civics class might not condone. Should we care?

BY BRUCE HOFFMAN

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“Intelligence is capital,” Colonel Yves Godard liked to say. And Godard undeniably knew what he was talking about. He had fought both as a guerrilla in the French Resistance during World War II and against guerrillas in Indochina, as the commander of a covert special-operations unit. As the chief of staff of the elite 10th Para Division, Godard was one of the architects of the French counter-terrorist strategy that won the Battle of Algiers, in 1957. To him, information was the *sine qua non* for victory. It had to be zealously collected, meticulously analyzed, rapidly disseminated, and efficaciously acted on. Without it no anti-terrorist operation could succeed. As the United States prosecutes its global war against terrorism, Godard’s dictum has acquired new relevance. Indeed, as is now constantly said, success in the struggle against Osama bin Laden and his minions will depend on good intelligence. But the experiences of other countries, fighting similar conflicts against similar enemies, suggest that Americans still do not appreciate the enormously difficult—and morally complex—problem that the imperative to gather “good intelligence” entails.

The challenge that security forces and militaries the world over have faced in countering terrorism is how to obtain information about an enigmatic enemy who fights unconventionally and operates in a highly amenable environment where he typically is indistinguishable from the civilian populace. The differences between police officers and soldiers in training and approach, coupled with the fact that most military forces are generally uncomfortable with, and inadequately prepared for, counterterrorist operations, strengthens this challenge. Military forces in such unfamiliar settings must learn to acquire intelligence by methods



markedly different from those to which they are accustomed. The most “actionable,” and therefore effective, information in this environment is discerned not from orders of battle, visual satellite transmissions of opposing force positions, or intercepted signals but from human intelligence gathered mostly from the indigenous population. The police, specifically trained to interact with the public, typically have better access than the military to what are called human intelligence sources. Indeed, good police work depends on informers,

undercover agents, and the apprehension and interrogation of terrorists and suspected terrorists, who provide the additional information critical to destroying terrorist organizations. Many today who argue reflexively and sanctimoniously that the United States should not “over-react” by over-militarizing the “war” against terrorism assert that such a conflict should be largely a police, not a military, endeavor. Although true, this line of argument usually overlooks the uncomfortable fact that, historically, “good” police work against terrorists has of necessity involved nasty and brutish means. Rarely have the importance of intelligence and the unpleasant ways in which it must often be obtained been better or more clearly elucidated than in the 1966 movie *The Battle of Algiers*. In an early scene in the film the main protagonist, the French paratroop commander, Lieutenant Colonel Mathieu (who is actually a composite of Yves Godard and two other senior French army officers who fought in the Battle of Algiers), explains to his men that the “military aspect is secondary.” He says, “More immediate is the police work involved. I know you don’t like hearing that, but it indicates exactly the kind of job we have to do.”

I have long told soldiers, spies, and students to watch *The*

Battle of Algiers if they want to understand how to fight terrorism. Indeed, the movie was required viewing for the graduate course I taught for five years on terrorism and the liberal state, which considered the difficulties democracies face in countering terrorism. The seminar at which the movie was shown regularly provoked the most intense and passionate discussions of the semester. To anyone who has seen *The Battle of Algiers*, this is not surprising. The late Pauline Kael, doyenne of American film critics, seemed still enraptured seven years after its original release when she described *The Battle of Algiers* in a 900-word review as “an epic in the form of a ‘created documentary’”; “the one great revolutionary ‘sell’ of modern times”; and the “most impassioned, most astute call to revolution ever.” The best reviews, however, have come from terrorists—members of the IRA; the Tamil Tigers, in Sri Lanka; and 1960s African-American revolutionaries—who have assiduously studied it. At a time when the U.S. Army has enlisted Hollywood screenwriters to help plot scenarios of future terrorist attacks, learning about the difficulties of fighting terrorism from a movie that terrorists themselves have studied doesn’t seem farfetched.

In fact, the film represents the apotheosis of *cinéma vérité*. That it has a verisimilitude unique among onscreen portrayals of terrorism is a tribute to its director, Gillo Pontecorvo, and its cast—many of whose members reprised the real-life roles they had played actually fighting for the liberation of their country, a decade before. Pontecorvo, too, had personal experience with the kinds of situations he

filmed: during World War II he had commanded a partisan brigade in Milan. Indeed, the Italian filmmaker was so concerned about not giving audiences a false impression of authenticity that he inserted a clarification in the movie’s opening frames: “This dramatic re-enactment of The Battle of Algiers contains NOT ONE FOOT of Newsreel or Documentary Film.” The movie accordingly possesses an uncommon gravitas that immediately draws viewers into the story. Like many of the best films, it is about a search—in this case for the intelligence on which French paratroops deployed in Algiers depended to defeat and destroy the terrorists of the National Liberation Front (FLN). “To know them means we can eliminate them,” Mathieu explains to his men in the scene referred to above. “For this we need information. The method: interrogation.” In Mathieu’s universe there is no question of ends not justifying means: the Paras need intelligence, and they will obtain it however they can. “To succumb to humane considerations,” he concludes, “only leads to hopeless chaos.”

The events depicted on celluloid closely parallel those of history. In 1957 the city of Algiers was the center of a life-and-death struggle between the FLN and the French authorities. On one side were the terrorists, embodied both on screen and in real life in Ali La Pointe, a petty thief turned terrorist cell leader; on the other stood the army, specifically the elite 10th Para Division, under General Jacques Massu, another commander on whom the Mathieu composite was based. Veterans of the war to preserve France’s control of Indochina, Massu and his senior officers—Godard included—prided themselves on having acquired a thorough understanding of terrorism and revolutionary warfare, and how to counter both. Victory, they were convinced, would depend on the acquisition of intelligence. Their method was to build a meticulously detailed picture of the FLN’s apparatus in Algiers which would help the French home in on the terrorist campaign’s masterminds—Ali La Pointe and his bin Laden, Saadi Yacef (who played himself in the film). This approach, which is explicated in one of the film’s most riveting scenes, resulted in what the Francophile British historian Alistair Horne, in his masterpiece on the conflict, *A Savage War of Peace*, called a “complex *organigramme* [that] began to take shape on a large blackboard, a kind of skeleton pyramid in which, as each fresh piece of information came from the interrogation centres, another [terrorist] name (and not always necessarily the right name) would be entered.” That this system proved tactically effective there is no doubt. The problem was that it thoroughly depended on, and therefore actively encouraged, widespread human-rights abuses, including torture.

Massu and his men—like their celluloid counterparts—were not particularly concerned about this. They justified their means of obtaining intelligence with utilitarian, cost-benefit arguments. Extraordinary measures were legit-

TRAPEZE

See how the first dark takes the city in its arms
and carries it into what yesterday we called the future.

Oh, the dying are such acrobats.
Here you must take a boat from one day to the next,

or clutch the girders of the bridge,
hand over hand.

But they are sailing like a pendulum between eternity
and evening, breathless, recovering,

balancing the air.
Who can tell at this hour seabirds from starlings,

wind from revolving doors or currents off the river?
Some are as children on the swings pumping higher
and higher.

Don’t call them back, don’t call them in for supper.
See they leave scuff marks like jet trails on the sky.

—DEBORAH DIGGES

imized by extraordinary circumstances. The exculpatory philosophy embraced by the French Paras is best summed up by Massu's uncompromising belief that "the innocent [that is, the next victims of terrorist attacks] deserve more protection than the guilty." The approach, however, at least strategically, was counterproductive. Its sheer brutality alienated the native Algerian Muslim community. Hitherto mostly passive or apathetic, that community was now driven into the arms of the FLN, swelling the organization's ranks and increasing its popular support. Public opinion in France was similarly outraged, weakening support for the continuing struggle and creating profound fissures in French civil-military relations. The army's achievement in the city was therefore bought at the cost of eventual political defeat. Five years after victory in Algiers the French withdrew from Algeria and granted the country its independence. But Massu remained forever unrepentant: he insisted that the ends justified the means used to destroy the FLN's urban insurrection. The battle was won, lives were saved, and the indiscriminate bombing campaign that had terrorized the city was ended. To Massu, that was all that mattered. To his mind, respect for the rule of law and the niceties of legal procedure were irrelevant given the crisis situation enveloping Algeria in 1957. As anachronistic as France's attempt to hold on to this last vestige of its colonial past may now appear, its jettisoning of such long-standing and cherished notions as habeas corpus and due process, enshrined in the ethos of the liberal state, underscores how the intelligence requirements of counterterrorism can suddenly take precedence over democratic ideals.

Although it is tempting to dismiss the French army's resort to torture in Algeria as the desperate excess of a moribund colonial power, the fundamental message that only information can effectively counter terrorism is timeless. Equally disturbing and instructive, however, are the lengths to which security and military forces need often resort to get that information. I learned this some years ago, on a research trip to Sri Lanka. The setting—a swank oceanfront hotel in Colombo, a refreshingly cool breeze coming off the ocean, a magnificent sunset on the horizon—could not have been further removed from the carnage and destruction that have afflicted that island country for the past eighteen years and have claimed the lives of more than 60,000 people. Arrayed against the democratically elected Sri Lankan government and its armed forces is perhaps the most ruthlessly efficient terrorist organization-cum-insurgent force in the world today: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, known also by the acronym LTTE or simply as the Tamil Tigers. The Tigers are unique in the annals of terrorism and arguably eclipse even bin Laden's al Qaeda in professionalism, capability, and determination. They are believed to be the

first nonstate group in history to stage a chemical-weapons attack when they deployed poison gas in a 1990 assault on a Sri Lankan military base—some five years before the nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway by the apocalyptic Japanese religious cult Aum Shinrikyo. Of greater relevance, perhaps, is the fact that at least a decade before the seaborne attack on the U.S.S. *Cole*, in Aden harbor, the LTTE's special suicide maritime unit, the Sea Tigers, had perfected the same tactics against the Sri Lankan navy. Moreover, the Tamil Tigers are believed to have developed their own embryonic air capability—designed to carry out attacks similar to those of September 11 (though with much smaller, noncommercial aircraft). The most feared Tiger unit, however, is the Black Tigers—the suicide cadre composed of the group's best-trained, most battle-hardened, and most zealous fighters. A partial list of their operations includes the assassination of the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at a campaign stop in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in 1991; the assassination of Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, in 1993; the assassination of the presidential candidate Gamini Dissanayake, which also claimed the lives of fifty-four bystanders and injured about one hundred more, in 1994; the suicide truck bombing of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka, in 1996, which killed eighty-six people and wounded 1,400 others; and the attempt on the life of the current President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga, in December of 1999. The powerful and much venerated leader of the LTTE is Velupillai Prabhakaran, who, like bin Laden, exercises a charismatic influence over his fighters. *The Battle of Algiers* is said to be one of Prabhakaran's favorite films.

I sat in that swank hotel drinking tea with a much decorated, battle-hardened Sri Lankan army officer charged with fighting the LTTE and protecting the lives of Colombo's citizens. I cannot use his real name, so I will call him Thomas. However, I had been told before our meeting, by the mutual friend—a former Sri Lankan intelligence officer who had also long fought the LTTE—who introduced us (and was present at our meeting), that Thomas had another name, one better known to his friends and enemies alike: Terminator. My friend explained how Thomas had acquired his sobriquet; it actually owed less to Arnold Schwarzenegger than to the merciless way in which he discharged his duties as an intelligence officer. This became clear to me during our conversation. "By going through the process of laws," Thomas patiently explained, as a parent or a teacher might speak to a bright yet uncomprehending child, "you cannot fight terrorism." Terrorism, he believed, could be fought only by thoroughly "terrorizing" the terrorists—that is, inflicting on them the same pain that they inflict on the innocent. Thomas had little confidence that I understood what he was saying. I was an academic, he said, with no actual experience of the life-and-death choices

and the immense responsibility borne by those charged with protecting society from attack. Accordingly, he would give me an example of the split-second decisions he was called on to make. At the time, Colombo was on “code red” emergency status, because of intelligence that the LTTE was planning to embark on a campaign of bombing public gathering places and other civilian targets. Thomas’s unit had apprehended three terrorists who, it suspected, had recently planted somewhere in the city a bomb that was then ticking away, the minutes counting down to catastrophe. The three men were brought before Thomas. He asked them where the bomb was. The terrorists—highly dedicated and steeled to resist interrogation—remained silent. Thomas asked the question again, advising them that if they did not tell him what he wanted to know, he would kill them. They were unmoved. So Thomas took his pistol from his gun belt, pointed it at the forehead of one of them, and shot him dead. The other two, he said, talked immediately; the bomb, which had been placed in a crowded railway station and set to explode during the evening rush hour, was found and defused, and countless lives were saved. On other occasions, Thomas said, similarly recalcitrant terrorists were brought before him. It was not surprising, he said, that they initially refused to talk; they were schooled to withstand harsh questioning and coercive pressure. No matter: a few drops of gasoline flicked into a plastic bag that is then placed over a terrorist’s head and cinched tight around his neck with a web belt very quickly prompts a full explanation of the details of any planned attack.

I was looking pale and feeling a bit shaken as waiters in starched white jackets smartly cleared the china teapot and cups from the table, and Thomas rose to bid us good-bye and return to his work. He hadn’t exulted in his explanations or revealed any joy or even a hint of pleasure in what he had to do. He had spoken throughout in a measured, somber, even reverential tone. He did not appear to be a sadist, or even manifestly homicidal. (And not a year has passed since our meeting when Thomas has failed to send me an unusually kind Christmas card.) In his view, as in Massu’s, the innocent had more rights than the guilty. He, too, believed that extraordinary circumstances required extraordinary measures. Thomas didn’t think I understood—or, more to the point, thought I never could understand. I am not fighting on the front lines of this battle; I don’t have the responsibility for protecting society that he does. He was right: I couldn’t possibly understand. But since September 11, and especially every morning after I read the “Portraits of Grief” page in *The New York Times*, I am constantly reminded of Thomas—of the difficulties of fighting terrorism and of the challenges of protecting not only the innocent but an entire society and way of life. I am never bidden to condone, much less advocate, torture. But as I look at the snapshots and the lives of the victims recount-

ed each day, and think how it will take almost a year to profile the approximately 5,000 people who perished on September 11, I recall the ruthless enemy that America faces, and I wonder about the lengths to which we may yet have to go to vanquish him.

The moral question of lengths and the broader issue of ends versus means are, of course, neither new nor unique to rearguard colonial conflicts of the 1950s or to the unrelenting carnage that has more recently been inflicted on a beautiful tropical island in the Indian Ocean. They are arguably no different from the stark choices that eventually confront any society threatened by an enveloping violence unlike anything it has seen before. For a brief period in the early and middle 1970s Britain, for example, had something of this experience—which may be why, among other reasons, Prime Minister Tony Blair and his country today stand as America’s staunchest ally. The sectarian terrorist violence in Northern Ireland was at its height, and had for the first time spilled into England in a particularly vicious and indiscriminate way. The views of a British army intelligence officer at the time, quoted by the journalist Desmond Hamill in his book *Pig in the Middle* (1985), reflect those of Thomas and Massu.

Naturally one worries—after all, one is inflicting pain and discomfort and indignity on other human beings ... [but] society has got to find a way of protecting itself ... and it can only do so if it has good information. If you have a close-knit society which doesn’t give information then you’ve got to find ways of getting it. Now the sofies of the world complain—but there is an awful lot of double talk about it. If there is to be discomfort and horror inflicted on a few, is this not preferred to the danger and horror being inflicted on perhaps a million people?

It is a question that even now, after September 11, many Americans would answer in the negative. But under extreme conditions and in desperate circumstances that, too, could dramatically change—much as everything else has so profoundly changed for us all since that morning. I recently discussed precisely this issue over the telephone with the same Sri Lankan friend who introduced me to Thomas years ago. I have never quite shaken my disquiet over my encounter with Thomas and over the issues he raised—issues that have now acquired an unsettling relevance. My friend sought to lend some perspective from his country’s long experience in fighting terrorism. “There are not good people and bad people,” he told me, “only good circumstances and bad circumstances. Sometimes in bad circumstances good people have to do bad things. I have done bad things, but these were in bad circumstances. I have no doubt that this was the right thing to do.” In the quest for timely, “actionable” intelligence will the United States, too, have to do bad things—by resorting to measures that we would never have contemplated in a less exigent situation? ▀

THE FUTILITY OF “HOMELAND DEFENSE”

*Don't even try to close the holes in a country,
and a society, designed to be porous*

BY DAVID CARR

.....

Get over thinking that America can be made safe. Defending a country as big and commercially robust as the United States raises profound, and probably insurmountable, issues of scale. There has been much talk of “Israelifying” the United States, but America has about forty-seven times as many people as Israel, and roughly 441 times the amount of territory to be defended. New Jersey alone is 753 square miles bigger than Israel, and home to nearly 2.5 million more people. Beyond problems of size, it’s all too reasonable

to assume that America won’t be safe. Righting various asymmetries merely designs—as opposed to prevents—the next attack. When one target is shored up, nimble transnational cells that can turn on a dime simply find new bull’s-eyes. Up against those practical realities, homeland security is the national version of the gas mask in the desk drawer—something that lets people feel safer without actually making them so.

If America is riddled with holes and targets, it’s because a big society designed to be open is hard to change—impossible, probably. In 2000 more than 350 million non-U.S. citizens entered the country. In 1999 Americans made 5.2 billion phone calls to locations outside the United States. Federal Express handles nearly five million packages every business day, UPS accounts for 13.6 million, and until it became a portal for terror, the Postal Service processed 680 million pieces of mail a day. More than two billion tons of cargo ran in and out of U.S. ports in 1999, and about 7.5 million North Americans got on and off cruise ships last year.

Group targets are plentiful. There are eighty-six college and professional stadiums that seat more than 60,000 people,



and ten motor speedways with capacities greater than 100,000; the Indianapolis Motor Speedway seats more than 250,000. Few other countries offer the opportunity to take aim at a quarter million people at once. Also plentiful are tall buildings—until just yesterday the dominant symbol of civic pride. Fifty of the hundred tallest buildings in the world are on U.S. soil. Minneapolis, a mid-size city that doesn’t leap to mind as a target, has three of them. And one of its suburbs has the largest shopping mall in the country, the Mall of America,

with at least 600,000 visitors a week.

As for trained personnel to defend our borders and targets, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which oversees the inspection of half a billion people a year, has only 2,000 agents to investigate violations of immigration law. The Postal Service has only 1,900 inspectors to investigate the misuse of mail. According to one estimate, it would take 14,000 air marshals to cover every domestic flight—more than the total number of special agents in the FBI. The former drug czar General Barry McCaffrey has pointed out that at least four different agencies oversee 303 official points of entry into the United States. After staffing increases over the past three years there are 334 U.S. Border Patrol agents guarding the 4,000 miles of Canadian border. The nation has 95,000 miles of shoreline to protect. “No one is in charge,” McCaffrey says.

In all the discussion of building a homeland-security apparatus, very little attention has been paid to the fundamental question of whether 100 percent more effort will make people even one percent safer. The current version

of America can no more button up its borders than mid-empire Britain could. Not just cultural imperatives are at stake. America makes its living by exporting technology and pop culture while importing hard goods and unskilled labor. The very small percentage of unwanted people and substances that arrive with all the people and things we do want is part of the cost of being America, Inc.

This is not the first time a President has declared a war within U.S. borders. In 1969 President Richard Nixon promised a “new urgency and concerted national policy” to combat the scourge of drugs—an initiative that has lurched along for more than three decades, growing to the point where the government spent \$18.8 billion in 2000 trying to solve America’s drug problem.

The drug war is progressing only marginally better than the one in Vietnam did. Adolescent use of most drugs has tailed off in the past year or two, but the hard-core population of 10 to 15 million American users can always find narcotics—and at a price that continues to drop. From 1981 to 1998 the price of both cocaine and heroin dropped substantially, while the purity of both drugs rose. From 1978 to 1998 the number of people dying from overdoses doubled, according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy. The Drug Enforcement Agency estimates that 331 tons of cocaine were consumed in the United States in 2000.

Counterterrorism is the ultimate zero-tolerance affair. Yet the same federal assets deployed in the war on drugs—the Coast Guard, U.S. Customs, the INS, the Border Patrol, the CIA, the FBI, and the DEA—are the first and last lines of defense in this new war. The fight against terror involves

a triad that drug warriors can recite in their sleep: global source management, border interdiction, and domestic harm reduction.

In both wars human ingenuity is a relentless foe. Create a new blockade and some opportunist will survey the landscape for an alternative path. “What the war on drugs tells us,” says Eric E. Sterling, of The Criminal Justice Policy Foundation, “is that people motivated by the most elementary of capitalist motives are constantly testing and finding ways to get in. Terrorists are as motivated as the most avaricious drug importer, if not more—and they are not going to be deterred by whatever barriers are put up.”

Less than ten miles southwest of where the World Trade Center towers stood, the part of the Port of New York and New Jersey that occupies sections of Newark and Elizabeth is back to work. On the day I went there in October, straddle carriers—leggy, improbable contraptions that lift and cradle containers—buzzed around in the shadow of the *Monet*, a large cargo ship. The *Monet* is a floating lesson in friction-free commerce. It is operated by CMA CGM, a French company, but owned by the U.S. subsidiary of a German firm; it is registered in Monrovia, and it sails under the Liberian flag. Like everything else in view, it’s massive, capable of holding 2,480 twenty-foot-long container units—the kind familiar from flatbed trucks and freight trains. It left Pusan, Korea, on September 19, stopping in three Chinese cities before sailing across the Pacific and through the Panama Canal and coming to rest in New Jersey on October 22.

The Port of New York and New Jersey is no less international. It’s the busiest port on the East Coast. In 2000 the

POŠTOLKA

(Prague)

When I was learning words
and you were in the bath
there was a flurry of small birds
and in the aftermath

of all that panicked flight—
as if the red dusk willed
a concentration of its light—
a falcon on the sill.

It scanned the orchard’s bowers,
then pane by pane it eyed

the stories facing ours
but never looked inside.

I called you in to see.
And when you steamed the room
and naked next to me
stood dripping, as a bloom

of blood formed in your cheek
and slowly seemed to melt,

I could almost speak
the love I almost felt.

Wish for something, you said.
A shiver pricked your spine.
The falcon turned its head
and locked its eyes on mine.

For a long moment then
I wished and wished and wished
the moment would not end.
And just like that it vanished.

—CHRISTIAN WIMAN

port moved approximately 70 million tons of general and bulk cargo, the equivalent of three million containers, from hundreds of cities around the globe, and half a million freshly built cars. The large containers it processes are stuffed, sealed, and tagged in far-flung locations, and their contents move, mostly unchecked, into the hands of consumers. A conga line of trains and trucks snakes out of the port, bound for a metropolitan market of some 18 million people.

Smuggling goods in containers probably started the day after shipping goods in them did. In a sting last January, U.S. Customs and the DEA seized 126 pounds of heroin concealed in twelve bales of cotton towels on a container ship at the port. That same month two men were charged with importing 3.25 million steroid pills that were seized during a customs examination of a container shipped from Moldavia. And in May of 1999 the DEA and Customs seized 100 kilograms of cocaine hidden under 40,000 pounds of bananas in two refrigerated containers. Sometimes the cargo isn't cargo at all. In October, Italian authorities found a suspected terrorist—an Egyptian-born Canadian dressed in a business suit—ensconced in a shipping container. His travel amenities included a makeshift toilet, a bed, a laptop computer, two cell phones, a Canadian passport, security passes for airports in three countries, a certificate identifying him as an airline mechanic, and airport maps. The container was headed for Toronto from Port Said, Egypt.

Before September 11 only about two percent of all the containers that move through ports were actually inspected. At Port Newark-Elizabeth there is a single giant on-site x-ray machine to see inside the containers; since September 11 two portable machines have been brought in to supplement it. The Customs Service enforcement team has been temporarily increased by 30 percent, but even that means that a mere 100 inspectors are responsible for more than 5,000 containers every day. The service has been on Alert Level One, which theoretically means that more containers are being inspected. But not even that vigilance—let alone the overtime—can continue indefinitely.

By reputation and appearance, the port is extremely well run, and it had tightened up security even before September 11. In the mid-1990s port officials began requiring every incoming truck driver to obtain an ID badge. One fall morning a man who appeared to be a Sikh, in a brilliant-orange turban and a lengthy beard, drew double takes from the other truckers—as he would anyplace else—when he stopped by the administration building to get his credential. When I was there, foreign crews were restricted from leaving their ships. The Coast Guard required ninety-six hours' notice before a ship arrived, and boarded every vessel before it was allowed into port. Two tugs accompanied each ship on its way in; if the ship were to head toward, say, a bridge support or some other target, the tugs would muscle the ship away.

But commerce, by definition, requires access. The port offers obvious targets because it is a place of business, not

a fortified military installation. Tanks of edible oils sit behind a single cyclone fence; tankers of orange-juice concentrate from Brazil stand unguarded in parking lots. Two squad cars, one belonging to the port and the other on loan from the Department of Corrections, were parked at one of the port's major intersections, but anyone can drive around much of the facility without having to pass a single checkpoint. A train moves in or out of the port four times a day, crossing under the New Jersey Turnpike and through a tangle of bridges and elevated freeways that carries 630,000 cars every day. Just across the turnpike, Newark Airport handles roughly 1,000 flights a day.

Testifying one month after the September attacks, Rear Admiral Richard Larrabee, the port commerce director, told a Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation subcommittee, "As a port director, I cannot give you or my superiors a fair assessment today of the adequacy of current security procedures in place, because I am not provided with information on the risk analysis conducted to institute these measures."

If a container holding heroin slips into the United States, the street price may go down, gangs may be enriched, and drug use may rise. If that same container held chemical or biological agents, or a nuclear weapon, the social costs would be incalculable. Doing nothing to deter such events would be foolish, but doing everything possible would be more foolish still. "There are two things to be considered with regard to any scheme," Jean Jacques Rousseau once observed. "In the first place, 'Is it good in itself?' In the second, 'Can it be easily put into practice?'" In the case of homeland security the answers are yes, and absolutely not.

Some measures, both quotidian and provident, will be taken. Practical approaches to making air travel safe again will emerge incrementally. Newly integrated databases will prevent a recurrence of the dark comedy of errors that allowed many of the hijackers into the country in the first place. Postal workers, it is to be hoped, will be tested for the presence of biological agents with the same alacrity that senators are. But the culture itself will not be re-engineered. America will continue to be a place of tremendous economic dynamism and openness.

At the port the country's muscular determination to remain in business is manifest on every loading dock. But if one looks hard enough, the cost of openness is there to see. In a quiet spot amid the industrial bustle—behind Metro Metals, on the north side of the port facility—is a nasty clump of twisted metal. Some of the girders from the World Trade Center, another brawny symbol of U.S. economic strength that also happens to be owned by the Port Authority, have come to rest here. The stink of that day—the burnt smell of implacable mayhem—hangs near, reminding us that great symbols make irresistible targets. ■

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THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

CENTERPIECE

WOMEN OF GOD

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BY MARY GORDON

Illustrations by Stan Fellows

Nuns are an endangered species. With a median age in this country of sixty-nine, and little new blood coming in, their numbers have dwindled markedly. The novelist and memoirist Mary Gordon, who herself once contemplated joining an order, examines this disappearing way of life, talks to survivors here and abroad, and wonders what, if anything, can replace the iconic figure of the nun in the popular imagination of Catholics and non-Catholics alike

For the whole of what I would call my childhood I wanted to be a nun. In my box of treasures, alongside my Dale Evans cowgirl outfit and my cutouts of Grace Kelly, I kept my favorite book, *The Nuns Who Hurried*, and my favorite doll, a stiff, coiffed figure in a habit of black silk. I enjoyed my cowgirl outfit and my cutouts very much, but the nun doll and the nun book had a special shimmer. They made me feel exalted and apart.

The Nuns Who Hurried was hand-lettered, more a pamphlet than a book. I have kept it for nearly fifty years. Its pages are yellow now. Some of the letters in the text are drawings in themselves. On the cover the word "Hurried" slants forward, rushing, like the figures of the rushing nuns below the word. The attribution, "By One of Them," seemed to me wonderfully sly.

A large part of the book is really an annotated list of the kinds of nuns who rise with alacrity at the sound of the bell that calls them to morning prayer, an irresistible list of occupations: contemplating nuns (my plan for myself), teaching nuns, comforting nuns, visiting nuns, catechetical nuns. I know I read this book myself, rather than having it read to me, because with it is associated my first pleasure in the solitary ecstasy of words as words. I learned the joy of the sound of the word "catechetical" from this book, and that it meant having to do with instruction in the faith. I followed the rhythm of the final, menial categories—"the ones who cooked and played the organ and fixed the altar"—with the headlong intoxication of a gavotte or a downhill run.

The catechetical nun is pictured with a half-naked child whose hair suggests that he is black (or Negro, as we would have said then), but his face, like the others' (because the drawings are only line drawings, and therefore the figures are only outlined), is the color of the page. The catechetical nun follows the missionary nun, pictured standing beside a bicycle in front of a grass hut. Her page says, "THE MISSIONARY NUN HURRIED—Because she thought of all the little and big PAGANS all over the country just waiting in the darkness of ignorance for the LIGHT of the world to dawn over them—And she wanted to be filled with this divine LIGHT so that it would shine out to all she met—And then to help that stubborn old heathen who needed special prayers."

Each of these nuns is smiling, the smile a single, quick, upturning curve. The point of the book is that they are smiling because their lives are intensely meaningful. *All their hurrying is in order to complete their work for the love and glory of God.* And they are smiling in part because their lives are a charming joke. They may look like plain, unlovely workhorses, but they are brides of Christ, *sposae Christi*, and they share in the romance invoked by the "NUN WHO COOKED": she "HURRIED—Because she loved this time of audience with her KING and LORD—So much of her time must be spent in the royal kitchen get-

ting the meals—But she still liked to think that it was CINDERELLA who won the PRINCE after all—wasn't it?"

The last page shows a group of kneeling nuns surrounded by a text that says, "They PRAY AND PRAY that WE will hurry up and start loving GOD REALLY AND TRULY—Because—they just can't bear the thought of all of us NICE PEOPLE not getting to heaven after ALL their hurrying—!"

We are all nice and they are all happy—a vision as simple and perfect as the line drawings with their blank centers. A quick look, not lingering and not close.

My devotion to my nun doll is memorialized in a photograph of me at four years old. I remember—in a vague, dim way that makes it seem like an image pulled from a memory before birth—the occasion of the photograph. The official photograph—as if I were royalty. As in royal photographs, the iconography was fixed. The child or children posed with their favorite toys—or their favorite presentable toys. The chewed-up blanket, the moldy teddy, would be kept from sight.

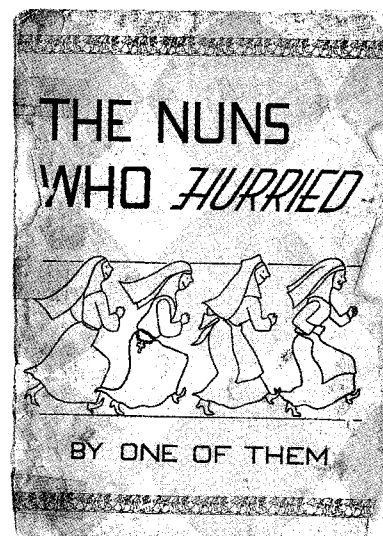
It is the night before the great event. My mother is on the telephone. I am in bed, but my heart is racing; tomorrow is the day of the photograph. I want to look pretty. I take the nail scissors from the bedside table and cut my hair. I can only imagine what kind of job I must have done at four years old. I remember only the snip-snip sound of the scissors—exhilarating, entirely productive. And then my mother's screams.

And then what? A blank. The next morning the photographer arrives. He is wearing a tan suit and brown shoes and a red bow tie, and I, with my formal sense as rigid as a Versailles courtier's, know this is all wrong, and that his taste is not to be trusted. I remember the stiff blue-corduroy jumper I am wearing, and the lace of the white blouse underneath it, irritating to the soft skin of my neck. I do not remember all the barrettes my mother stuck all over my head, trying to conceal the damage I had wrought, though I could see them later in the photograph. I don't remember the look on the photographer's face when he asked me what toy I'd like to be photographed with, and I produced my nun doll: uncuddleeable, something to be looked at and admired rather than held. I now understand that the photographer must have thought he had been paid to photograph a freak, a child with her uneven hair held in place by multiple barrettes, a child holding a nun doll. Did I cut my hair because I knew nuns were shorn and I wanted to be like them?

I know that my father wanted me to be a nun. He was a Jewish convert; perhaps this accounted for his romanticism. He died when I was seven, but I remember his saying, with real pride, "My daughter will be either a nun or a lady of the night." He was a man of extremes. I didn't know what a lady of the night was. It sounded glamorous, but no more glamorous than the image of a nun. He and I had a party piece about nuns. He would say, "Honey, what do you want to be when you grow up?" And I would say, without skipping a beat, "A contemplative."

I knew exactly what I meant. I knew, even at four and five, what contemplation was: Silence and prayer. Union with God. I had knelt beside my parents in the dim light of early-morning masses. I knew as many prayers and hymns as nursery rhymes. More. I dreamed of First Communion, believing those who said it would be the happiest day of my life. And I had had a glimpse of a real contemplative, a glimpse that would press itself into the hot wax of my imagination—an indelible image marking a life devoted to the creation of images.

We were visiting the convent of Mary Reparatrix, on East Twenty-ninth Street in Manhattan. The Sisters of Mary Reparatrix were a contemplative order. They specialized in retreats for working women. This was my mother's connection to them: she made their retreats. Their habits were sky-blue.



I read books about nuns. I wrote out my religious name on napkins the way other girls wrote out what would be their married names. Always something dramatic: Sister Dolorosa, Sister Perpetua, Sister Clotilde.

I went into the chapel with my parents. From the back I could see one of the nuns kneeling in prayer. Her form was impeccable: back straight, hands folded, head bowed for the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. A beam of light fell on her. And I knew that saturation in pure light was the most desirable state in the world. How paltry, how vulgar, the image of the bride: accompanied, diminished by ornament, her silence marred by music and the sniffing of the crowd.

I read books about nuns: novels, biographies, spiritual diaries. I practiced saying an abridged version of the Divine Office that they said or sung. I wrote out my religious name on napkins the way other girls wrote out what would be their married names. Always something dramatic: Sister Dolorosa, Sister Perpetua, Sister Clotilde. But I have to admit that many of my strongest images of nuns were taken not from actual nuns but from the movies. Two movies in particular: *The Bells of St. Mary's* and *The Nun's Story*.

My family watched *The Bells of St. Mary's* on TV every Christmas. And every year, at the first glimpse of Ingrid Bergman in a habit, my mother would say, "Why that bitch thought she had the right to be a nun while all the time she was planning to run away with that Italian, I will never know."

Ingrid Bergman's Sister Benedict is a tomboy; she knows how to play baseball, and she teaches a studious boy to box. But she has academic standards, too. Bing Crosby's Father O'Malley thinks these standards should be done away with if they make people unhappy. Their main bone of contention is a young girl, Patsy, the daughter of a prostitute who has had to take up her profession because her husband has deserted her and her child. She leaves the child in the care of Father and Sister. Father finds the deserter husband, and the marriage is patched up. But Patsy deliberately fails her exams because she doesn't want to leave Sister Benedict.

A subplot: St. Mary's is about to be torn down, because the selfish plutocrat who's building an office tower next door wants the land for his parking lot. The nuns pray for a miracle: that he will give them his building. In a shameless display of sentimentality—including a dog that kneels in church—the plutocrat has a change of heart. Before this, when Father O'Malley tells Sister Benedict the school may have to close, he reminds her that she has to face facts. She says, "We've tried so hard not to face facts." Sister Benedict runs a school and is the superior of at least ten other sisters, but she's not quite an adult. She's a boy.

Sister Benedict faints. The doctor tells Father O'Malley that she has TB, and in a moment of dubious medical thinking he tells Father not to let her know—she'll get depressed and won't heal. Better to tell her she's being transferred to Arizona because she can't be trusted to deal with children. Sister Benedict accepts everything—including the idea that a priest who is clearly her intellectual inferior has the right to ruin her life because he doesn't agree with her pedagogy. She kneels and prays, tormented only for a moment before breaking out in the ravishing smile of complete acceptance. But Father O'Malley sees the error of his ways. In one of the great romantic lines in cinema he says, "When Doctor McKay said you were perfect, he was right. For that's what you are. But he didn't mean physically. Because, Sister, you have a touch of tuberculosis." Sister Benedict's expression of gratitude is so intense that the only logical next step is for them to fall into each other's arms. But they don't. She goes off to Arizona. He stays at St. Mary's. The last shot in the film is his.

I didn't see *The Nun's Story* for the first time in a theater. I must have seen it for the first time with my girlfriends, sneaking downstairs to watch *The Late Show* while my mother slept. My family were the kind of Catholics who would have boycotted such a movie, the kind of Catholics who had contempt for the Hollywoodization of the Faith—although my mother would never have been able



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to resist Bing Crosby, however diluting his interpretation of the priesthood. And besides, Bing Crosby always made the Church look good. At the end of *The Nun's Story*, however, Audrey Hepburn *leaves*.

The movie begins with Gabrielle, a young Belgian (Audrey Hepburn improbably almost plain), taking off her rings and setting them next to a picture of a young man framed in a silver heart. Gabrielle becomes Sister Luke before our eyes. She enters a nursing order that is semi-cloistered. She wants to be a nurse because her father is a famous surgeon. But the order stresses being a good nun far above being a good nurse—and this is the problem. Gabrielle is a gifted scientist and a gifted nurse, and these talents conflict with her vow of obedience, contributing to her sin of pride—a sin that she must publicly confess, as she must publicly confess (and also record in her spiritual diary) every imperfection, every infraction of the rules.

A Jewish friend with whom I was watching the movie found it all appalling. I wondered why I did not; why I found it enchanting—the silences, the gliding walk, above all the belief in perfection, which I have spent many thousands of analytic dollars trying to give up. I imagined that if, like Audrey Hepburn, I could confess my faults to Edith Evans (the wise mother superior, the superior mother, blessed with the gift of discernment, her hard-won wisdom shining in her sorrowful eyes), if Edith Evans would bestow on me the secret smile of favor that she bestows on Sister Luke, if Edith Evans would make a cross on my forehead every morning, I might have the stamina to try for perfection. The

Ingrid Bergman in The Bells of St. Mary's (1945)

stamina not to give it up as impossible. The stamina to believe that perfection is not a delusion, a trap. As Jesus said, "You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Of course, we were meant to believe that we never could be perfect but that the attempt was infinitely worthwhile.

Sister Luke is by far the smartest in her nursing class. A new superior (not Edith Evans) urges Sister Luke to fail an exam intentionally, as a test of her humility. Sister Luke can't bring herself to do it, and is forced to serve in a mental hospital.

When I thought of being a nun, I imagined that I could keep the vow of silence, prostrate myself, kneel during dinner. But one thing I knew I could never do was deliberately fail an exam.



*Audrey Hepburn in
The Nun's Story (1959)*

Sister Luke is sent to Africa, where the male helpers are called "boys" and the nuns pray only for their conversion. (The year the movie came out, 1959, marked the apogee of the unexamined colonialist dream. We could bring antibiotics and baptism to the heathen.) Sister Luke returns to Belgium just as World War II is about to begin. Her father is killed by the Nazis. She has been ordered by her superiors not to become politically involved, but she helps the Underground. In standing against evil she disobeys her vows and comes to the realization that she can no longer be a nun. She leaves without farewell, walking through a door into a bleak, gray world.

Audrey Hepburn's face is a masterpiece of tortured idealism—of great gifts constrained, of the desire (this is, after all, what she does best) to give everything, to hold nothing back. Her anguish comes from the impossibility of the struggle. Did I believe that if I gave myself over to an impossible struggle, I would look like that? Could I ever raise such a face to God, a face cleansed by suffering, and believe with all my heart that nothing else mattered? Personality? Mind? Saving lives? Is it possible that all else pales before the perfection of the spirit—the conformity of the will to the will of God? Whatever Sister Luke's life is, it is not trivial. Whether she succeeds or fails, the stakes involved are the highest. She is in love with God, but she

cannot love God as a nun and be the person she was meant to be.

Why not? Can't she just spend more time with Edith Evans? Can't she just hold on until Vatican II? It's only twenty years away, and then the order will see that it must be part of the twentieth century. But then she will take off her veil. She will be a gaunt, spent figure in an ill-fitting suit. Her hair will be gray and thin. No one will want to look at her.

The images I formed of nuns, based on books and movies, were for many years strong enough to blot out the harsh reality of my relationships with living nuns. The truth is, nuns didn't like me. I wanted to like them. For a few years I loved them easily, effortlessly, and although I was often afraid of them, I assumed that their displeasure with me was deserved. I remember being so afraid of the school principal that when she ordered my first-grade class to come down the stairs two at a time, I hyper-obediently jumped down two stairs at a time, and was taken out of the line and shaken for being "wise" and "fresh"—two words that it took me many years to realize might, in other contexts, have a positive meaning.

After a while, though, I could no longer swallow the evidence: these nuns weren't very smart; they certainly weren't as smart as I was. Perhaps it was simply a matter of bad luck, but from fourth grade on I had a series of terrible, not to say extravagantly incompetent, nun teachers. My fifth-grade teacher turned into a man before our eyes: some hormonal blip made her grow facial hair and

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**The image, the
idea, of a nun
brings together
three powerful
elements: God,
women, and sex.
For whatever else
she is, a nun is
a woman who has
pledged herself
to God and
renounced sex.**

seemingly dropped her voice an octave every week. My sixth-grade teacher was so old that she had to ask me and my classmates for help tying her shoes; our only instruction was reading aloud from our texts. My seventh-grade teacher was a retired nurse; she seemed perpetually weary and out of her depth. Once, when one of the children yawned, she threw an eraser and shouted, "Don't you think I've seen enough dirty old throats to last me the rest of my life?" But my teacher in eighth grade, which coincided with my puberty, was the object of my deepest adolescent contempt. She was ignorant and proud of her ignorance; she mocked learning and stressed the superiority of blind obedience. I made it my mission to torture her. Once, knowing she had a loathing of chewing gum, I bought gum for every kid in the class—there were fifty-four of us in those boom years—and directed everyone to begin chewing at once. She quickly traced my role in this subversive plot, took me outside, and threw me against a wall. I do think I deserved to be punished, but her reaction increased my disdain.

Things were not much better at my all-girls high school, in Queens. My first-year English teacher was a woman of great brilliance; Sister M. taught me to love poetry and Shakespeare. But we knew she was crazy. It was the era of teased hair, and we were not allowed to tease our hair. Sister M. became convinced that a girl in our class had teased her hair, and when the girl denied it, Sister M. took her into the bathroom and doused her head in the sink. She discovered that the girl simply had naturally thick hair. Later she began to lose her eyesight, but until she was given new glasses, she accused us of altering the print in her books. I loved her, but I didn't want her claiming me as her own, for fear of turning mad myself.

In my junior year I tried to start a literary magazine, the first in our school's history. In its only issue I made the mistake of including my review of a reading by Allen Ginsberg. One of my comments was to the effect that upon hearing Allen Ginsberg, any demons in the neighborhood would bury themselves in available swine, and beetle over available cliffs. Sister R. wrote BLASPHEMY in large red letters across the text, and banned publication of the magazine. But I had my weapons. At a poetry reading given by the Brooklyn diocese for the best high school English students, the reader was Father Daniel Berrigan, who would later become famous for his anti-Vietnam protests. I showed Father Berrigan my article and told him that Sister R. had said it was blasphemy. He took it home, along with a hefty sheaf of my poems, and wrote to me: "You must make your own maps of your own landscapes. But I see you are a poet." Sister R. gave in. We published.

In my senior year I was put in the class of a teacher reported to be the best in the school. She was obese but cheerful. She didn't like me. Once she said to the class, "I'll bet you think you know who has the highest grades in the class." Everyone called out my name. Smugly, she disabused them: I had only the third highest grades. Another time she took a few of us to Fordham University, to a performance of Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. The subway train got stuck in the station, and sweat began to break out on her upper lip. "Do you think we'll have time for dinner?" she kept saying, looking to us for rescue. "Where do you think we'll be able to have dinner?" We could never again meet her eye.

One reason these nuns didn't like me was that I was untidy. I was untidy because I didn't want to be like them. I understand that they were undertrained and overworked. But my mind was ardent and endlessly appetitive, and they offered me dry husks and gruel. What if I had had different nuns, like some I met as an adult? Maybe it was better that I hadn't. Maybe I would have continued to want to join up. And then what would have become of me?

But I don't really think it would have mattered much what nuns I met after seventh grade. That was the year I fell in love with Joseph Montalbano. He was the smart boy in the class, I the smart girl. We tied each other in spelling bees. He was a handsome boy with a perpetual tan and the look of a young George Hamilton. I don't know what I loved about him, but I bought my first straight skirt with him in mind—the bottom half of a Kelly-green suit I got for Easter, along with a green pillbox hat. I thought I looked like Jackie Kennedy. Wearing my new Easter outfit, I walked up and down in front of Joseph's house, hoping he'd come out and notice. He didn't. I re-enacted this every day after school for several weeks. Then I came up with a brilliant plan: I threw my dog over his fence, rang the bell, and said the dog had got into his yard. He looked at me as if I were insane and showed me the way to the back yard. I put my dog on the leash, and the two of us slunk home.

Joseph Montalbano paid no more attention to me for the rest of the school year. Then he moved to Texas. But I had lost my vocation. Nowadays when friends ask me what "vocation" means, I sometimes look at them strangely, as if they'd just asked me to define the word "bicycle." "Vocation" means a call to the religious life. It is intended to suggest not an individual choice but a summons that one could be in eternal peril for refusing. Clearly, a vocation that could not withstand the temptation of Joseph Montalbano was not very strong.

One might think that my experience with Joseph Montalbano, an experience of such ignominious failure, such humiliation, would send me running

*Vanessa Redgrave in
The Devils (1971)*





back to my convent plan. It did not. There has not been one day since the day I knew I was in love with Joseph Montalbano when I thought it possible that I would become a nun. Before that day I thought no other life was possible.

The image, the idea, of a nun brings together three powerful elements: God, women, and sex. For whatever else she is, a nun is a woman who has pledged herself to God and renounced sex. How could this combination not engender ripe fantasy? The angel nun, the devil nun—Ingrid Bergman radiant in renunciation, Vanessa Redgrave in *The Devils*, grotesque and humpbacked, bleeding on her knees while she says the Sorrowful Mysteries. Sister Mary Ignatius explains it all for you. Mother Theresa saves them all for God. The voluptuous body beneath the swaths of fabric; the dowdy nun with the five-dollar haircut.

The difficulties, the roiling contradictions, of all these ideas, images, fantasies, and fears about nuns led me to keep away from them for twenty years. I didn't speak to a single nun from the day I graduated from high school, in 1967, until the late 1980s, when I encountered nuns as political allies, signers of an advertisement taken out in *The New York Times* saying that not all Catholics were anti-choice. After the ad appeared, the nuns and their communities came under pressure from the Vatican to recant. These women, many in their sixties, had risked emotional and financial security in defense of women's rights. I had to acknowledge that in the years that I had changed, they had changed too.

The Vatican Council had affected them profoundly. Initiated in 1959 by Pope John XXIII, in his words to "open the windows of the Church" onto the modern world, it was in session from 1962 to 1965. Its effects were radical, and it is still the watershed event by which Catholics know themselves: conservatives think the liberalizing effects of the council eroded the Church's authority; liberals see it as the great good time, the beginning of a profound era of humanization and revitalization. The council issued many documents urging religious communities to modernize themselves, to rethink their constitutions, to study their origins and the intentions of their founders. Many American communities made enormous changes in their ways of life; they moved, as many of us living through those years had to move, at lightning speed, with effects that could be disorienting, soul-wrenching, and exhilarating. Within two or three years many nuns had stopped wearing traditional habits and had replaced their religious names with their given names. The semiotics were clear: liberal nuns wore street clothes and used their own names; conservative nuns kept their habits and the names they had been given at induction.

Of course, I acknowledged these changes intellectually, but it required the passage of many years and the happy accident of meeting three nuns in the academy to allow me to get close enough for real conversations. I now say a sentence I would have thought impossible in my youth: There are nuns who are my friends. And as I grew more familiar with their lives, I came to understand that they were facing the demise of a way of life that had nourished and sustained them.

The figures, I learned, are grim. The median age of American nuns is sixty-nine. From a high in 1965, when there were 180,000 nuns in the United States, the number has fallen to 80,000. This decline has had serious effects on the education and health-care systems, which were once importantly enhanced by the pool of cheap labor provided by nuns. What growth areas there are for nuns are not in the progressive communities but in the conservative ones, which want to return to a pre-conciliar way of life. Vocations are on the upsurge in the Third World, but those communities tend to be patriarchal and traditional, and there are concerns about issues of colonialism—are these real vocations, or just a means to a more prosperous, Western style of life? Joining a religious order has traditionally been a path to the middle class for Europeans and Americans; but

now, in what has been referred to as the “post-Christian” West, many women who would have been drawn to the religious life see other, better options.

This is both a moment of crisis and a deeply poignant time in the history of nuns as we in the West have known them for the past hundred years. Thus I wanted to pose a series of questions to a variety of nuns, for the purpose of exploring lives whose self-definition is at once clear and flexible: there are many women who call themselves nuns who would find the lifestyle of other women who call themselves nuns strange, alienating, or even unacceptable. This is also a now-or-never moment. If the number of nuns is dramatically diminishing, and the future of their way of life is precarious at best, now is the time to ask real, living nuns questions about their lives. This is important if only as a corrective to the potent fantasies so readily at hand, both for people whose lives have been touched by nuns and for people who have never met one.

What, then, does it mean to be a nun today? What does it mean to be a celibate woman whose life is formally dedicated to the service of God, a woman who lives in some sort of community with other women, in some sort of relationship to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church?



It seemed only natural to begin my exploration of these questions with the nuns who are my friends. Janet Walton, Celia Deutsch, and Beth Johnson. If they were characters in *The Nuns Who Hurried*, they'd be the musician nun, the historian nun, and the theologian nun. Janet teaches worship at Union Theological Seminary, in New York City; Celia is my colleague in the religion department at Barnard College; and Beth is on the faculty of Fordham University. They are high on the list of people whose lives I admire, people who integrate their social and political beliefs with their work lives and their inner lives. Their intense vitality, the quality of their engagement, makes them people I want to be around. I can talk to them about the religious life without embarrassment. Their tender and occasionally fierce clarity allows, sometimes forces, me to move out of archaism or cliché.

Celia calls me on my tendency toward pessimism, urging me to question the “temptation to stay too long in the desert, to stare too long into the heart of darkness, to the point of paralysis.” “Paralysis,” she said to me once, “is much safer than hope.” Janet and Beth have challenged me to reject a relationship to God based on being Daddy's little girl. Janet and I have spoken about the difficulty of accepting the idea of God as mother beside the idea of God as father if one adored one's father but found one's mother problematic. Beth's theology has made me see the possibilities of a God more mysterious and various than I had had the courage to imagine.

In addition to teaching worship at Union Theological Seminary (as a Catholic nun, she is a novelty at that traditionally Protestant institution), Janet lives a life that bears witness to the Gospels' call for solidarity with the poor. She once brought a group of seventy pastors, laypeople, and scholars to a church in the South Bronx run entirely by neighborhood women, so that the visitors could meet and talk to people to whom the Scriptures really matter. They and the women discussed the biblical passage in which Elijah urges a widow to use her last oil and flour to make bread for the prophet, not to feed herself and her child. She is rewarded with an everlasting supply of oil and flour. The women told the group that they understood the widow, who is the center of the story for them, because they knew what it was to do something daring when everything else had failed.

Janet has had a ten-year friendship with a paranoid schizophrenic who lives



in a cardboard box on 125th Street, in Harlem. She visits him each week, and takes his clothes home to wash. Once she gave him a bar of Ivory soap, and he said to her, "Oh, Janet, this is the wrong soap. This is soap for clean people." She has a master's degree in piano from Indiana University. In her spacious, peaceful apartment in Union faculty housing she has played Chopin for me with a subtlety and a passion that made me know I hadn't understood him properly before.

Celia is a distinguished scholar who studies and teaches early Judaism and early Christianity at Barnard. But part of her work involves organizing interfaith events between her parish and the local synagogue—recently a blood drive, during which the priest and the rabbi spoke about the different understandings of blood in the two traditions. In her apartment, in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, she keeps a meditation room, to which the women in her parish, mostly from the Caribbean, always have access—an oasis of silence in difficult and often overwhelming lives. Her friendship with these women is warm, easy, and rich. She has told me a story about standing on her front porch with one of the women, holding hands as they said good-bye. The woman teased Celia about not wearing a habit, saying, "Now, if you were a proper nun, you'd have a long veil and a long skirt." Celia asked her if she would be happier with a nun in a habit. "If you were a proper nun," the woman said, "I wouldn't be standing on your porch holding your hands."

Beth's radical commitment to justice for women and the poor is the force that drives her theology. I first met Beth when I heard her speak about an image taken from the medieval mystic Julian of Norwich—the image of the crucified Jesus as mother. For Beth, this means replacing the idea of an angry father God, demanding his son's blood in atonement for human sin, with the idea of a mother who sheds her own blood in order to bring her child life.

Because of Beth, I had to readjust one of my oldest nun fantasies. Whenever I envisioned nuns writing, I was always the nun writer. I saw myself in my Audrey Hepburn habit, sitting at my simple desk, silently creating poetry about and for the glory of God. I never thought of myself as the reader of something that a nun wrote. But in reading Beth Johnson's book, *She Who Is* (1992), a feminist theological analysis of the naming of God, I was struck by both the poetry and the rigorous logic of her argument, by her ability to consider the darkness of doubt, to delve into the impossibility of the search for God. She uses language that I love, language with a depth and nuance too often missing from both theology and feminist thought. Her use of the word "lament," for example, makes me reconsider it as an important practical vehicle. "Only lament and the courage of hope against hope enable the community to continue walking by divine light, inextricably darkened by the power of evil."

Beth once took on Cardinal Ratzinger, who is the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the body that determines what is acceptable doctrine and what is not. Her application for tenure in the theology department at Catholic University was held up on the grounds that her feminist theology was insufficiently orthodox. The department is a pontifical institute, so candidates have to be sanctioned not only by academic colleagues but also by a board made up largely of bishops and monsignors. Beth decided to stand her ground, and was told that she would have to appear before an assembly of all the American cardinals—an assembly never before convened.

"I said that I would if they met three conditions," Beth recalls. "I would bring legal and academic counsel of my own choosing; they would provide a court stenographer; and both parties would sign off on the transcript, so that later no one would be able to misinterpret what had been said."

"Cardinal Bernardin was the head of the American bishops then, and he was very kind. He talked about how important my work was to many of the women

in the Church. Then another cardinal turned to me and said, 'So, tell me, Sister, do you think Our Lady packs more punch in heaven?' I was absolutely stunned. So this is the theological level they're operating on, I said to myself.

"The theological questions that were at the heart of the matter were about the influence of feminism on my theology: Did I think that feminist issues were as important as Scripture and tradition? Did I think that all theology had to be a commentary on feminist issues or be called inauthentic? When I advocated the use of female images of God, was I intending to add them to male images, or to supplant the male images? Then there were questions of authority: Did I believe that a theologian had the responsibility, as all Catholics do, to respond obediently to the teaching authority of the bishops? Did I accept its responsibility to correct matters of faith, and was I ready to submit to the corrections?

"I had once taught eighth grade, and I saw these cardinals as a bunch of restless, resentful thirteen-year-old boys, and I said to myself, Now I must become their teacher. I answered all their questions, and they approved my tenure. Yes, I won, but it took a great deal out of me. I experienced a kind of post-traumatic stress for a year or so afterward. Then I resigned from Catholic U. I could feel my own fear, my tendency to self-censor. I came to Fordham, where I'm very happy. But I think *She Who Is* came out of the darkness of that time."

All three of my nun friends live alone. Janet and Beth relish this; Celia thinks there's something wrong with being a nun and not living in community. But their orders are intensely important to all of them. Janet's is the Sisters of the Holy Names; Beth's is the Sisters of St. Joseph, the order that taught me and, it must be said, bedeviled my youth; Celia's is the Sisters of Sion, a congregation founded in the nineteenth century by a Jewish convert. "Originally the order was dedicated to the conversion of the Jews, but we got over that," she says. "Now we're devoted to witnessing the faithfulness of God's covenant to the Jewish people, and promoting good relations between the two faiths."

Despite their awareness of the graying of their orders, and of the falling numbers, none of the three is much worried about the future of religious life. They think there will always be nuns of some sort, but they don't know precisely what forms the vocations will take. They all believe that the way of life they themselves embraced is dying, and yet they all, in looking ahead, invoke images of rebirth: Celia and Beth the Resurrection, Janet the phoenix. Celia mentions a simile drawn from a book she admires: *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (2000). The simile compares the recent history of nuns to the evolution of a dinosaur into a songbird. No one, says the author, Sandra Schneiders, herself a nun, really needs songbirds except for their beauty, their power to lift the heart.

All three of my friends are proud of the steps their sisters have taken toward a mature understanding of their vocation. Beth says that her training, in the early sixties, was very restricting, stressing detachment from the world. But when she read the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, she felt she had the theological framework she needed. "I'll never forget the words that did it," she says. "The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." I thought, This is worth my life.

These women understand their vows of poverty and obedience in similar ways. Obedience is not to the Church or to a superior but to the spirit of God, in response to the signs of the times in consultation with members of their communities. They are pleased to be giving their entire academic salaries to their orders; that they can share their earnings is a source of joy and pride.

This is a deeply poignant time in the history of nuns. If the number of nuns is dramatically diminishing, and the future of their way of life is precarious at best, now is the time to ask real, living nuns questions about their lives.

I asked Mother Marie what misconceptions about contemplative nuns she would like to clear up. She said, “We’re not stoic, we’re not afraid of life, we’re not afraid of responsibility, we’re not cold fish, and we’re not afraid of marriage.”

Their positions on celibacy vary: Celia and Beth think celibacy is necessary to religious life. Janet does not.

All three chafe under the restrictions of a patriarchal church, but they express their unease differently, and this is reflected in their styles of self-presentation. Janet is striking, even fashionable. Her often startling aqua eyes can flash with anger; she once took me severely to task for a story I wrote about a nun, which she said fed into stereotypes. I know a couple of well-meaning priests who are afraid of the rough side of her tongue. The refusal of the Church to ordain women is a challenge to her faith which she prays to be able to endure. Beth is calm and slow-moving; the reluctance of the hierarchy to adapt to the world is a source of fatalistic befuddlement to her. Celia is a thin, dark-haired gamine, with a relaxed, jokey style that makes my colleagues say—seconds after they reveal she’s a nun—“But you’d never know it.” She finds the official Church’s resistance to women bewildering, but she doesn’t let it get in her way. She herself, she says, would not want to be ordained.

They are all staying in the Church not least because it is the larger structure—however fragile—that has made their way of life possible. As Beth tells me: “You wanted to be a nun when you were a kid. I wanted to be a tugboat captain. I see myself in a tug pulling along the old bark of Saint Peter.”

Because I was trying to get a wider perspective on nuns than I could get from just talking to my friends, I asked Celia if she would help to put me in touch with different kinds of nuns. She sent me to Sister Maryann Seton Lopiccolo, the episcopal delegate for religion for the Diocese of Brooklyn, who gave me the name of a contemplative sister, Mother Marie de Chantal, of the Visitation Order in Bay Ridge.

I had not realized what emotional strain this work would entail. Every time I had to call a nun on the phone, I was afraid. And I was most afraid of visiting Mother Marie de Chantal, who was, I was told, more traditional than the nuns I had known in recent years. The day before I was to see her, I felt headachy and exhausted; my throat was sore. The day of my visit I awoke having lost my voice. My husband had to call and say I couldn’t make it. Mother Marie told him she would pray for me.

But what made me afraid? She had been kindness itself on the phone, with a light, girlish voice that was entirely welcoming. What did I think would happen? That she would yell at me for being “wise” or “fresh”? That she would uncover my profound failures of virtue? That she would call me a fake, someone interested in nuns for self-serving, ambitious motives?

I made a new date to see her. I channeled my anxiety to the problem of what shoes to wear. I was wearing a light-blue pantsuit, which I thought modest—but I usually wear high heels with it. My daughter told me not to wear high heels—“Not the kind of high heels you have, Mom”—to talk to a traditional nun. So I wore my elegant pantsuit with black sneakers. The mismatch made me feel unattractive, but I liked thinking that no one wanted to look at me as I walked the streets of Bay Ridge, where my Uncle Joe used to live.

When I visited Uncle Joe, Bay Ridge was an Irish neighborhood. Now it has an Islamic center, and the veiled women are not nuns but Muslims. The two people I asked for directions answered me with Russian accents. A block away from the subway the neighborhood is much more the domain of the descendants of Western Europe and almost exurban; with hedges and tiny lawns. The buildings belonging to the Visitation Order—convent and academy—take up nearly a block of Ridge Boulevard. At the end of the driveway, standing at a door, a nun in habit waved at me.

Fears of being reprimanded welling up inside me, I apologized for being

late. But this woman was not about to reproach me. A short woman in her early fifties, with large brown Italian eyes, she offered me coffee and cookies—Pepperidge Farm pirouettes, my favorite. It's bathing-suit season, I said, I'd better say no. Then I felt like a fool for mentioning a bathing suit to a contemplative.

Since the days when my father and I had told the world at large that I wanted to be a contemplative, I had been intensely curious about the details of the contemplative life. But I had never before spoken to a real contemplative—the point of the life being seclusion from the world. I was avid to know the details of the schedule, at least in part to see whether it conformed to my imaginings of it. Indeed, the sisters' day is structured around times of prayer. They meet six times a day for communal prayer, and have three daily periods of private devotion and meditation.

"You see, we lead an intensive life of prayer, a pure life of faith," Mother Marie told me. "Prayer is really the center of our day; it's what we devote ourselves to. Originally I entered an active community, but then I understood that I wanted a contemplative life. I was drawn to an intense life of prayer."

There seems to be no time in the day that is meaningless—no slack hours, no residue of triviality or folly or plain waste. Of course, it is also possible to say there is no spontaneity and little individual choice. It is a schedule that seems outside history: it is not much different from religious life before Vatican II—and not much different from monastic life in the Middle Ages.

I asked her if it was difficult to pull herself away from her prayer life to do practical tasks. "You see, it's like being in love," she said. "When you're in love, you really don't want to be anywhere except alone with the person you love. If I have to go out to Eighty-sixth Street, to buy a pair of shoes or something, I'm always eager to get back. It's the spiritual atmosphere I love, and so I miss it. Since I'm the superior, I suffer a bit from not having as much solitude as I would like. But part of our vocation is living in community. For example, if during my free time I wanted to take a walk and say my rosary, and one of the sisters said she needed to talk to me, needed my help or my support, I would feel that my first duty was to her. Community life is a great challenge to virtue. I believe it's in community that you grow. In patience, in generosity."

I looked at her face, which had the sweetness, the calm, the quiet assurance, of a woman happily married to her high school sweetheart and still amazed at her own good luck. Her ease of manner made the life she lives seem un-extraordinary; but, of course, it is extraordinary, because it is a hidden life, quite foreign to most modern imaginations. So I asked her what misconceptions about contemplative nuns she would like to clear up. "First," she said, "we're women, we're humans, and we experience everything a woman does, but we experience a very deep call from God—and the call is captivating—to a life of intimate prayer. We're not stoic, we're not afraid of life, we're not afraid of responsibility, we're not cold fish, and we're not afraid of marriage. We're not that different from other women. Being a contemplative doesn't make you less of a human being. Saint Iraneaus says, 'The glory of God is man fully alive.'"

Because her life is so different from those of Janet, Celia, and Beth, I was curious about her understanding of obedience in comparison with theirs. It was remarkable how many points of similarity there were. Mother Marie said that now, since Vatican II, obedience wasn't unquestioning; it was a course a sister and her superior worked out together. "I believe in the value of obedience because it helps me to go beyond myself, to go beyond myself for the community," she said. "It's a kind of self-surrender that I think is valuable."

One reason I wanted to speak to Mother Marie was that her order was doing unusually well—it had six new postulants last year. In an age of diminishing vocations this is somewhat phenomenal. She thinks that the appeal of a con-





templative life is very strong for women now, that there is a resurgence of interest in the spiritual these days, and that people want to come back to a more intense connection with God. She pointed out that the new postulants were all in their late forties, and said that perhaps her order's having no age limit was important. Four of the postulants have had marriages that ended in annulment; two never married. They were all successful working women: teachers, librarians, businesswomen.

Mother Marie was excited by her fledglings, a proud mother. She reminded me of a southern Italian *casalinga*, with an earthbound good humor that has no place for malice or mean-spiritedness. For a long time she and Sister Susan, in their late forties, were the youngest in the order. It was difficult, she told me, not to have age mates: "A couple of years ago I was discouraged. I sense a great spirit of renewal. And I have faith that if this way of life is meant to continue, God will see that it does."

We walked outside in the garden. "The apartment building across the road advertises that they have a view of this," she said with a laugh, pointing to the flowering bushes, the green lawn, the generous trees. "I was thinking of writing to them and suggesting we could use a little help having our chapel repaired. We're very lucky to have all this. But a contemplative needs space—you need a place to walk and feel you're on your own."

I asked her if such a reflective life could breed perfectionism—what the Church considers the sin of scrupulosity, a sense of failure at not living up to a lofty ideal. "Our founder, Saint Francis de Sales, had a charism that was very gentle," she said. "He kept reminding us that we would fail, that we would always fail, but that we should try. And it's very different since Vatican II. We're much more open; there's much more discussion. The whole idea of scrupulosity is very foreign to me. I'm Italian, and I had a very loving father, who thought everything I did was great. So that's kind of how I think of God."

I couldn't help wondering if I could live in a place like this. I looked at the beautiful grounds, one corner given over to climbing toys for the children of the academy. A pleasant-faced nun in an apron was talking to a fat calico cat. The sun shone through the trees; the wind blew my hair and Mother Marie's veil. She kissed me good-bye at the door. I felt I was being sent out to a coarser, harsher place.

Since the Middle Ages writers and thinkers about religious life have divided it into two large categories: the *vita contemplativa*, a life of prayer and seclusion; and the *vita activa*, a life of engagement in the world, the life lived by those religious who teach, nurse, care for the poor. One of our cherished notions about nuns is that the good works they do have a different flavor from the good works of the non-professed; that there is a difference between good works and charity—the difference between duty and burning love. The incredible devotion inspired by Mother Theresa is connected to this idea. So I went looking for a nun who has made a real difference in the lives of the poor.

When I told a friend, a psychological consultant, that I was trying to find such a nun, he steered me to Sister Mary Paul, a co-founder of the Center for Family Life, in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn. In his opinion, and in the opinion of others who have evaluated it, the center offers the most successful program in the city for keeping children out of foster care.

Since the center was started, in 1978, by Sister Mary Paul and Sister Geraldine (who died last year), it has served the people of the community with a variety of programs that include individual and family counseling; literacy and language tutoring; after-school programs and day camps; emergency food programs; thrift shops; advocacy services; employment training; and college-tuition

assistance. All these services are sorely needed in Sunset Park, a neighborhood in flux, with older white ethnics having given way first to Puerto Ricans and more recently to Dominicans, Ecuadorians, Hondurans, Mexicans, and Chinese.

My friend had told me that Sister Mary Paul was in her eighties—and very, very tiny. “You think she’s going to break,” he said, “but she’s the most competent administrator in New York.” Her staff stays with her year after year—a very unusual loyalty in not-for-profit places like this, where the burnout rate is high.

Even forewarned, I was unprepared for how small Sister Mary Paul really is—certainly no more than four-foot-ten. She also seems to suffer from scoliosis. Her habit sat unevenly on her torso—a full habit, complete with veil. I asked her what her order is. “I’m a sister of the Good Shepherd,” she said. I told her that that was one of the orders I fantasized about when I was a girl. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd cared, I said, for “wayward girls.”

Sister Mary Paul practically leaped out of her chair at the term. “What were ‘wayward girls’? Girls who made a sexual mistake, that’s all,” she said firmly. “No one said anything about boys who made sexual mistakes. When our order was founded, in 1641, we were called Sisters of Refuge, and that’s what we provided: a refuge for women who were victims of the double standard. The motto of our community is ‘One person is of more value than a world.’”

Sister Mary Paul places herself squarely on the side of all victimized women, from the person she has seen most recently to someone dead 300 years. Talking to her, I understood the limited utility of terms like “liberal” and “conservative.” She wears a full habit, and she uses her religious rather than her given name, but her political allies include some of the most radical leftists in New York, and she lives not in community but by herself. “I wear my habit because I’m not enthralled by anonymity,” she explained. “And I feel that my habit says to people in the community, ‘I’m not going away. I’m here for the long haul.’”

But, she assured me, her job isn’t to shape consciences to fit the traditional Catholic mold. “I don’t give them religious training; their consciences aren’t my responsibility. We never force anybody to do anything. We give them options.” What about the options for family planning? “We wouldn’t provide that sort of thing here,” she said, “but we might tell them where they could get more options.” She earned my admiration with this adroit answer. Sister Mary Paul has had to navigate the choppy political waters of the Catholic Church and the larger public arena, serving the needs of her clients while avoiding the wrath of the archdiocese—no mean feat.

“When I began my religious life, I lived in a semi-cloistered community of sisters,” she recalled. “Our days were shaped by liturgy, much of it sung, and it was very beautiful and satisfying. But the world changed, the nature of religious life changed, and it would have been foolish not to change with it. The changes were for the better—we have a much more vibrant laity, much more diverse. Now I have a different experience of community. This neighborhood is my community, even though I live alone, since Sister Genevieve died. I learn a tremendous amount from all kinds of people, believers and nonbelievers. My prayer life, my liturgical life, is of great sustenance to me: it’s what keeps me from burning out.

“My prayer life is different from what it used to be, but I don’t think I’m praying only when I’m in church. A mother can’t be telling her children she loves them every second; her love is in her care for them. I hope that whatever I do or however I welcome the people who come here, it will be a result of God’s spirit working with me. The Church is not my only source of knowing God. I find Him all around me. I see so much of glory; I see such outpourings of glory.” It occurred to me that few social workers include the word “glory” in their vocabulary.

My friend had told me that Sister Mary Paul, of the Center for Family Life, in Brooklyn, was in her eighties—and very, very tiny. “You think she’s going to break,” he said, “but she’s the most competent administrator in New York.”



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"What I live by and value and love in my vocation," Sister Mary Paul said, "is all brought together in this center, for the people I care for and love. I'm happier here than I could be anywhere else." But doesn't dealing with people whose lives are so full of tragedy shake her faith? "No, I see much more good than bad. And what I feel is that there's always a place to join people, always room to be with them in their sorrow, and that's what my job is. Mine, not only God's."

Among American orders that are considered activist and progressive, perhaps the most outstanding is the Sisters of Loretto, an order founded in Kentucky in the nineteenth century. In the spring of 2000 I visited their motherhouse in Kentucky for a few days of reflection. I was moved by the spirit of the older sisters, particularly Sister Mary Luke Tobin, who is ninety-two. A hero of the anti-Vietnam War movement, she was jailed many times and participated in the Paris peace talks.

My rewards that week were as much aesthetic as religious. The gentle landscape of Kentucky, a female landscape of tender rolling hills, the rich old trees on the convent grounds, the high, wide windows in our sun-filled rooms, suffused the atmosphere with moments of quiet delight. Among the delights was Sister Elaine, the retreat director.

Many women like me, in our fifties, are on a secret but obsessive mission to find older women who are attractive in ways we would hope to be. Sister Elaine is one. When I met her, she was sixty-six. Her hair was thick and gray and curly, pinned back in a bun. All the time we were at the center, she wore cotton pants and shirts and simple sandals, but it was impossible not to invoke the word "elegant" when one saw her.

During our visit I learned that Elaine had, twenty years earlier, spent a sabbatical year in a Zen monastery in Japan. It seemed appropriate; she had the aura of simplicity and spaciousness that marks the Japanese decorative arts. She told me that her prayer life had been much influenced by Buddhist meditation and was wordless and dark; in her spiritual life she was drawn most of all to silence. When I asked her why she hadn't joined a more contemplative order, rather than the Sisters of Loretto, she said that their engagement kept her asceticism from becoming inhuman, dry.

I knew that Elaine would be leaving Kentucky for New Mexico a month after I saw her; she had been retreat director for twenty-two years, and thought it was a good time to consider her next move. I knew she planned to work with a midwife. I liked this idea very much—a major change at sixty-six. I envisioned her working on an Indian reservation. But when I phoned her in Santa Fe earlier this year, she was puzzled: where had I gotten this idea? In fact she had taken a sabbatical to consider what her next move within the community would be; she was renting a gatehouse on a large estate in Santa Fe, living alone, reading, writing, contemplating. "Well, Mary," she said to me, "we've all benefited so much from your imagination, how could I mind that you applied it to my life?"

If the convent in Kentucky was a dream of monastic perfection, the gatehouse in Santa Fe was a paradisaical blend of austerity and lushness. In early May the grass was dark green and the flowering trees were in bloom.

Because I was entirely comfortable with Elaine, I felt free to ask her difficult questions, not only about celibacy but also about how she had accommodated being an attractive woman with being deliberately out of the sexual running.

"The nature of my vow of celibacy has changed enormously," she told me. "When I entered, you were forbidden 'particular friendships.' You weren't really supposed to love people: the love of God was supposed to be enough. Now we understand the enormous importance of affective love. We understand the enormous need to know and be known. I think I'm a natural celibate.



I've been in love, but never did I feel I wanted to go to bed with that person; never did I imagine for a second doing anything that would make me break my vows."

I asked her if she could imagine non-celibate nuns. "I think if you want a partner, community life is not for you," she said. Did that mean, I asked, that religious life is not for the highly sexed? "I think so," she replied. "But you see, I really don't know. It is for a rare kind of person." Did she think she had missed out on one of the big things in life? "Yes. There's something I'll die not knowing about. But there are things we all die not knowing about, aren't there? I think, though, that not being joined to any one person gives me the freedom to be open to many people."

I asked about her relationship to her own body, her femaleness. What happened to her image of herself as a female when she put on the habit for the first time, and then when she took it off? "You have to understand that before I entered, I never thought about how I looked," she said. "My mother loved clothes, and, essentially, she dressed me, but I was never really interested. Once, when I was a senior in college, I was coming in from a date, and the woman at the desk in my dorm said to me, 'Elaine, you are really beautiful.' And I was completely surprised. I said, 'Oh, really?' I had never thought of it."

I asked Elaine how she thought of her appearance, of being looked at, now. She replied, "I try to dress in a way that doesn't draw attention to myself, either by excessive elegance or by excessive ugliness." "I don't want to look dowdy," she said. I told her how frequently the word "dowdy" came up when I talked to nuns. Was it an anxiety? "Well," she replied, "we all know dowdy nuns. We can pick them out—pulled polyester. You see, I think that's a way of standing out. I dress not to stand out. But mostly I don't think about it. It's such a freedom not to need to think about makeup. Not to wear earrings. I always hated earrings."

I touched my dangly earrings and looked down at my painted toenails in the grass. "Did you ever think clothing was fun?" I asked. "No," she said. "I just never was interested." I asked her if she understood how different that made her from most other women in the world, who spend a great deal of mental energy—most of it negative—thinking, worrying, anguishing, about how they look. "You see, I believe our life is very freeing," she said. "Most people don't understand that."

"Now poverty is much more difficult in the new way of doing things," she continued. "Before, when we had no access to money, when we literally owned nothing, when we had to ask the superior for money to buy a stamp, we didn't have to think about it. Now, every day, I make many decisions about how to spend money, about whether I am living in a spirit of poverty. I try to buy only what I really need. I don't really like things."

A natural celibate, I thought, and a natural ascetic. Did she indulge herself in anything? "Yes," she said with a laugh. "Organic vegetables. Eating organic vegetables makes me really, really happy."

I pointed to her luxurious surroundings. "Is this a life of poverty?" I asked. "Well, of course not, so it can seem like a fake vow," she replied. "What I'm interested in is inner detachment. I didn't ask for this place. I wanted to be in Santa Fe because I have friends here, and someone was talking to the woman who owns this place, and she happened to say, 'I have an apartment to rent, and my ideal tenant would be a nun.' The person said, 'I happen to know a nun who's looking for a place.' It turned out the apartment was affordable, and so I got it."

"I would find it difficult to live in squalor," she said. "I would find it difficult to live without light. But I like to think that if I had to live in squalor but I had access to nature, if I could get out from it, I could handle that."

"But the really poor live in a squalor they can't get out of," I said.

I asked Sister Elaine about her relationship to her own body, her femaleness. What happened to her image of herself as female when she put on the habit for the first time, and then when she took it off?

“Interestingly enough,” Dulcie wrote to me, “there is still a cachet to being a nun on this Protestant seminary campus. I have not quite figured out why the fascination persists even with this fat old lady with dangling earrings and the Joe Pesci speech pattern.”

“Yes,” she replied, “but my understanding of my vow is an inner detachment—that I can use things or not, but that I’m not attached to them.”

“There’s something wonderful about growing old in a community,” she told me. “We support each other, we keep each other vital, we have shared memories, a shared history.”

I asked her how she felt about the fact that this way of life appears to be ending. “I am sad, because it was so good for me, and so good for so many people,” she replied. “But I think we’re going to have to be much more imaginative about religious life. We’re going to have to cross borders not only of community but of religious denomination—and this will be very difficult, because we’re not good at using each other’s symbols. But it’s going to have to be much more inclusive, in a way I can’t predict.”

When I decided to write about nuns, I consulted Beth Johnson about seeing some nuns who had taught at my high school when I was a student. My plan was to seek out the most liberal and the most conservative. Sister Patritius, the most conservative, was, I knew, very old. I remembered her as brilliant and formal and frightening. Beth said that Sister Patritius had written blistering letters about her work, accusing her of heresy. But Sister Patritius wouldn’t see me, pleading age and hearing problems, perhaps unwilling to give her time to the likes of me. The most liberal nun, Sister Dulcissima, was teaching in a Methodist seminary in Columbus, Ohio, and was accessible by e-mail. And she was now called Joanmarie Smith. I couldn’t think of a clearer sign of the loss of the old glamour than this change of name.

Joanmarie, now sixty-nine, taught in our high school for only a year, and I wasn’t in her class. But she was a whirlwind presence: young, beautiful, talking excitedly about Martin Luther King and Vatican II and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. She was the faculty adviser to the cheerleaders, and the cool girls orbited her; I was just outside the orbit, so we probably never even spoke. But I had thought of her a lot, and had once used the name Sister Dulcissima in fiction. I hadn’t seen her in thirty-five years.

When I e-mailed to say I wanted to come and see her in Columbus, she replied,

O Mary, you are a glutton for punishment! The last time (March) I attempted to get to NYC, I waited seven hours in Washington D.C. while U.S. Air canceled five shuttle flights into [La Guardia] and could not promise that the sixth would fly. I turned around and came home. I got my \$ back but lost a day. They stamped my ticket, “Trip in vain.”

On the other hand, I’d love to meet you ... Of course, there is always the possibility of a phone appointment. Seven cents a minute and we can be in pajamas. In the meantime, let me answer some of your questions. Re: celibacy as the specifying note of nunhood. Unfortunately, I don’t see any future for nunhood in the western world. I am unaware of any compelling theological framework that would attract young women ... As for what nuns can do that any other woman could not do—NOTHING. If anything, there are more strictures on nuns than on laywomen. I have to watch what I say and do so as not to arouse the ire of the local Bishop, not that I could not survive if he made the Josephites dismiss me (unlike most other nuns who get stipends and no pension), but it could be so awkward for the Methodists who have been so good to me.

Interestingly enough, there is still a cachet to being a nun on this Protestant seminary campus. I have not quite figured out why the fascination persists even with this fat old lady with dangling earrings and the Joe Pesci speech pattern. It probably has something to do with the cognitive dissonance engendered by their old Bells of St. Mary images and me. It may also have to do with the fact that I am obviously a very happy person—and very funny. Single and

never lonely—all of which I consider genetic and chemical gifts for which I am very grateful ...

Love,
Joanmarie

(Most of the profs and administration call me “Dulcie” as do all my friends and sisters)

In a later e-mail she wrote,

The prospect of entertaining a famous NY novelist and memoirist who is into “noticing” and recording what she sees has sent me into a decline. Moreover, my instincts tell me that the Sister of Loretto lives in some desert aesthetic that cannot fail to impress you ... And you will leave here confirmed in your impression that Josephites are classless ... In the meantime, have a safe trip to New Mexico. I’ll be thinking of you and saying ... “Please God, let that other nun’s house be a mess!”

Dulcie was waiting for me at the airport gate. A large, robust woman with short ginger hair, she wore black pants, a black shirt, black Reeboks, and dangling green earrings. En route to her apartment, where she had invited me to stay the night, we started talking about the nuns at my high school. I asked about the principal, who I had thought even then was senile to the point of mute immobility. To illustrate the inadequacies of my Catholic high school education, I told a story about the principal’s getting on the loudspeaker and saying, “Today, for sale in the bookstore, *The Brothers Kalamazoo*.”

Dulcie laughed. “She was my superior, of course, and we had to ask the superior for a penance when we did anything wrong,” she said. “Well, I took a hot pot from the stove and put it on the Formica counter and burned it. I had to ask a penance for that. She said, ‘Would you have done that in your own home?’ I thought, How do I answer that question? Like, when did you stop beating your wife?”

Dulcie’s apartment could have been in any apartment complex anywhere in the United States. The carpets were beige, as was the furniture, which she said she got at Wal-Mart. The walls, however, were covered with colorful Impressionist reproductions. There was also a lithograph of habited nuns in front of a convent, and a framed business card—her grandfather’s—advertising violin lessons. The striking feature of the room was a glimpse of a river through a plate-glass door: the river ran beneath trees that were, in May, in lush, full leaf.

Dulcie made herself a martini, and I opened a bottle of Merlot I’d bought on the way. She said, “I still don’t understand really why you came.” “I find phone and e-mail insufficiently Incarnational,” I told her.

The phone rang. It was one of Dulcie’s closest friends in the Josephite order, Sister Elaine Roulet, a chaplain at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, in New York, where Jean Harris was incarcerated and where Kathy Boudin, convicted of robbing a Brink’s truck and killing a guard, still is. In an interview last July, Boudin said that if she had been a Catholic, she would have become a nun.

I got on the phone with Elaine, who said, “You’re with the best, you know. Dulcie is the kindest, the funniest, the holiest. You’re lucky to be there.” Dulcie took the phone. “I’ve got a martini and Mary’s here, trying to tell me sex is everything. You did say sex was everything, didn’t you, honey?”

Of course I’d said no such thing, but I had no desire to wreck her shtick. “Elaine, do you think sex is everything?” Dulcie asked her friend. “No? Well, I guess that’s our problem.”



“There was this really strange thing [after Vatican II], and my friends and I talk about it. A kind of collective amnesia came over us. None of us can remember what happened to our old habits ... Did we throw them away? Did we burn them?”

Dulcie had wanted to be a nun since she was twelve, when she transferred from public school to Catholic school and adored the nuns who taught her. “I worshipped one of them, and I knew I wanted that life, a life that was intensely devoted to God, a life that was edgier and more poetic than any life I knew. I was lucky that I came of age at a time when they honored that kind of early knowing. Like Tiger Woods: he knew at four he was meant to play golf. And I knew I was meant to be a nun.”

She entered a special high school for girls who wanted to be nuns, but when she went into the novitiate proper, she had a kind of nervous collapse, marked by inexplicable fainting spells, and was sent home. “When I walked in, my father handed me a cigarette,” Dulcie told me. “And it was such a gesture of defeat. I took the cigarette and I thought, I’m not going to be a nun.”

But she was desperate to return. She took classes at Hunter College, and then got a clean bill of health from a doctor a few months later. She re-entered the novitiate. “I’ve never looked back,” she told me.

She taught grade school and studied philosophy at Fordham University, writing a doctoral dissertation on John Dewey. She taught at a Sister Formation College of her order. Then her mother had a stroke. Just at the time money was needed to supplement the inadequate nursing care that Medicaid provided, she was offered a job at the Methodist seminary in Columbus. She accepted the job as a lark, thinking she’d do it awhile for the salary. Nineteen years later she is still there.

So for nineteen years she has lived not in a convent with other sisters, as she had done her whole adult life before, but alone in an apartment—a situation that would have been unthinkable when she entered the order, five decades ago. I asked her if she misses community life. “I love being alone,” she said. “Of course, I talk to my friends in the community every day. We get together for feast days, holidays. We have retreats together. My other best friend, besides my sister, was in the community, but she left to marry someone who’d been a brother. I talk to her every day too.”

I asked Dulcie what being a nun means to her. “I’m very proud to be part of a group of women who made so many large moves,” she said. “Women who are not defined by their relationship to a man—or to a woman, for that matter. Who are defined by their relationship to God. Who are really free.

“My life as a nun has been tremendously freeing. Right now I have the best of both worlds. Particularly among non-Catholics being a nun has a kind of mystique. But if I want to be anonymous, like in the supermarket, I can be. People project all kinds of things onto the idea of my being a nun. So I can use that. Like, for instance, I hate big parties, so I never go to the seminary president’s party at the end of the year. They think it’s some kind of spiritual discipline. But it’s just that I hate big parties. The irony is, just as we’re really starting to get it right, living a mature religious life, as adults responsible for our own lives, the jig is up.”

I brought up the time of the great changes, the years during and immediately after Vatican II. “The only analogy I can make is with people who went through the downfall of communism,” she said. “After it’s over, it’s hard to think of it as anything but inevitable. There’s no possible going back, even if you didn’t know what was ahead. When we changed out of the habit, there was this really strange thing, and my friends and I talk about it. A kind of collective amnesia came over us. None of us can remember what happened to our old habits. And our profession crosses. Did we throw them away? Did we burn them? I can’t imagine that even the poor would have wanted to wear them, so I don’t think we gave them to the poor. It’s a very puzzling metaphor.”

What about prayer life? “I read the Scripture, I say the Rosary. I think the

Rosary is a kind of perfect prayer. It functions on so many different levels: as a mantra, so you can lose the words; as a vehicle for narrative meditation—you can focus on the words of the prayers, or on any of the mysteries. And it's a diurnal rhythm that's very beautiful. And I love the Eucharist very much. The bounty of it, the celebration of it."

Dulcie then asked if I would like to pray with her. I agreed but felt a bit shy. She moved to sit across from me and said, "Why don't we pray for our fathers? It's the anniversary of my father's burial. The anniversary of the day I bought him the cheapest coffin there was." So we prayed for Charlie and David. We prayed for the children whose lives are ruined before they begin. We prayed for peace in the Middle East. We prayed that Senator Jim Jeffords would convert from Republican to Democrat. Dulcie said that once, at a conference, she raised the question—deadpan—of whether it was a sin to be a Republican. Then she glanced around at some of the members of the audience, who looked stricken. "People don't always get my tone," she said. We closed our eyes. She kept hers closed; I opened mine to look at her. When she prayed, she was transformed. In her black shirt and pants, her black Reeboks, on her beige couch, she was as luminous as the nun in blue who knelt in the perfect beam of light. We hugged each other. "I didn't know how this would be," she said. "I was a little afraid. But it's wonderful."

Another friend, Regina, called, and Dulcie told her we were having a great time. I could hear them laughing. I asked her what Regina's old name was. It was Sister St. Thaddeus. I said I knew her—that she had come to our school when I was in third grade, and had made a great impression on me, but I couldn't quite remember why or how.

The next morning I woke at seven, but Dulcie had already been out to get us good coffee and—"just to prove the power of evil"—cinnamon rolls. I went upstairs to shower and pack. When I flushed the toilet, it overflowed. I ran down the stairs to get the plunger. "You were the one who wanted Incarnational," she said.

On the plane home I finally remembered Sister St. Thaddeus. I had been enchanted by her, thought her beautiful and holy. She wrote her name in script on the blackboard, and I loved the way she made the capital *T* in her name. I decided to change the way I made my capital *T*. Over and over I practiced my capital *T*s by rewriting her name: "Sister St. Thaddeus." The helpless love of a certain kind of girl for a certain kind of nun. We loved them the way we loved movie stars and the way we loved God. I don't love Dulcie in either of those ways, but I do love her in a way that I couldn't if she weren't a nun. This is mysterious to me, this unique response that seems somehow connected to a woman's living a vowed, consecrated life. What will we do with this kind of love if nuns disappear?

The genius of the Catholic Church is its ease of movement from the local to the global. Having revisited and re-absorbed my high school past, I now craved the global, not to say the official, perspective. I wanted to talk to someone in the Vatican.

All my sources agreed that the person to talk to was in the Vatican office that deals with nuns, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, an Immaculate Heart of Mary sister named Sharon Holland. When I phoned her from New York, she said she would have to "clear it with the cardinal" (she didn't say which one) before she could speak to me; she told me to phone again when I got to Rome. When I did, I found I had been cleared by the cardinal. Sister Sharon and I made an appointment to meet in her office, on Via Conciliazione, the street leading up to St. Peter's. The Street



**In the Vatican,
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of Conciliation, which celebrates the rapprochement between the Vatican and Mussolini's government. My eye falls on the dome of St. Peter's, perhaps the most visible symbol of the Church's huge, inflexible authority.

The office looked like any other—long corridors, pseudo-busy secretaries seated at official-looking desks. But how many offices have the word “consecrated” on the door? I was told to wait for Sister Sharon in a singularly unadorned room. The floors were marble, as I imagine all the floors in the Vatican are, and there were unlovely navy-blue upholstered couches and chairs; one was broken, its face to the wall. There was also a picture of the Pope when young and vital, and a crucifix.

Sister Sharon, a silver-haired woman in her early sixties, came to greet me. She was wearing a dark-blue suit but no veil. By now I thought I understood the semiotics: Rockefeller Republican.

When I asked her what her department is responsible for, she began by saying, “Things having to do with sisters and brothers and apostolic communities”—the last a category so amorphous I couldn't take it in. She said that her office deals with everything from providing documents and arranging conferences for superiors to administering what she called “alienation of property.” She later defined this as “selling large pieces of property.” Her department is also in charge of “dispensations for individual religious”—which she explained as nuns and priests being released from their vows. If congregations make changes in their constitutions, these also have to be approved by her office. “Although we wouldn't withhold approval so much as we might make suggestions,” she said. I asked if it would be theoretically possible for the congregation to withdraw its approval of an order's constitution, thereby removing its legitimacy. “Possible, yes,” she said, “but my friend who's worked here for twenty-five years says he's only seen it happen once.”

Sister Sharon assured me that her department is not in the plug-pulling business, and cleared up a misapprehension: the Vatican does not control the funds of any religious orders and has no financial power over them. I asked her why some nuns felt they had to muzzle themselves out of fear of Vatican censure. She said it probably came from misunderstanding; no order would ever be punished or suppressed because of the behavior of an individual member. I refrained from mentioning Sister Jeannine Gramick, a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, who was ordered to keep silent by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Sister Jeannine had been told she would have to quit her ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics unless she agreed to reinforce the Church's interpretation that homosexual acts were intrinsically “disordered” and “evil.” She has now left the School Sisters of Notre Dame and joined the Sisters of Loretto.

Sister Sharon said that most sisters, to say nothing of the public, don't understand how much dialogue and productive communication goes on between representatives of the Vatican and superiors of religious orders before any action is taken. And the action then takes place under the guidance of the superiors. She gave the example of Father Robert Drinan, the former Massachusetts congressman, whose superiors ordered him to give up political life, which he did. “Now, you don't think the Vatican was going to put that kind of pressure on the Jesuits, do you?” she said firmly. Next she brought up the case of Sister Mary Agnes Mansour, who had been working as the director of Michigan's Department of Social Services. In that position she presided over the distribution of funds for abortion. She was told that she could keep her job if she expressed opposition to public funds' being spent on abortion. This was something she didn't want to do, nor did she want to give up her job. “But she asked for a dispensation,” Sister Sharon recalled. “She was not dismissed.”



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Sister Sharon produced a chart showing changes in vocations from 1978 to 1998. In America there has been a 21 percent decrease. In Africa, however, there has been a 45.5 percent increase, and in Asia a 48 percent increase.

“But,” I asked, “she was out of the order?”

“By her own choice, yes.”

For Sister Sharon, these cases seemed to have had happy outcomes; for many American Catholics, however, they created great anguish and conflicts that have yet to be resolved.

I asked Sister Sharon for statistics about the number of vocations worldwide, and she produced a chart showing changes in vocations from 1978 to 1998. In America there has been a 21 percent decrease, and in Europe a 31 percent decrease. In Africa, however, there has been a 45.5 percent increase, and in Asia a 48 percent increase.

“It’s been observed,” Sister Sharon said, “that vocations decrease in areas of greater prosperity and increase in less prosperous areas. Which is why there is great concern that the areas of discernment of vocations and the formation of vocations are very important. A word you’ll hear spoken very frequently in congregations is ‘internationalization.’” She explained this as the inclusion of non-Europeans and non-North Americans in positions of leadership. She told me that many congregations have adapted very well to this. There are many Asian sisters, particularly Indians, in positions of authority in congregations around the world. This is less true of Africans, because the missionary tradition is much younger there.

The mention of African nuns reminded me of two recent news stories. The more shocking story came out of the nightmare landscape of Rwanda: two Benedictine nuns were convicted in a Belgian court for participating in the massacre of 7,000 people who had sought refuge in their convent. These nuns were Hutu, and had been expected to shelter some Tutsi, members of their rival tribe. Instead they provided the gasoline that resulted in the Tutsi’s mass immolation in a garage in which they were gathered.

The second news story concerned a report, sent to the Vatican by an Irish nun, about the abuse of nuns by priests. The report charged that certain African priests were demanding sexual favors of nuns. Many of these priests had formerly gone to prostitutes but had quit that practice for fear of AIDS. The report cited the case of a priest who had impregnated a nun; forced her to have an abortion, during which she died; and then said her requiem mass. I pointed out to Sister Sharon that some people in the Church were disturbed that the treatment of these priests had been so light: some counseling, some transfers. “I have a lot of trouble with that report,” Sister Sharon said. “It was leaked to the press. I have problems with documents that are marked ‘confidential’ not being kept confidential.”

I suggested that this might have been done because of frustration with the Vatican’s foot-dragging. “What could we do?” she said. “It was up to the local bishops. I’m afraid that this might have a chilling effect on sisters who might have reported this kind of incident. Now they’ll be afraid that their confidentiality might not be kept. And it was greatly embarrassing to African clergy. They feel that everyone is looking at them as potential abusers.”

“Isn’t this the argument that’s habitually used against reporting abuse?” I asked. “I don’t know the particular cases,” she said. I asked her if the very fact that the identities of the priests were kept private constituted a kind of protectionism—a gentle response very different from, say, the excommunication of liberation theologians. “Liberation theologians put their name to something they wrote,” she said. “They do something public. What these priests did was not a public act.”

How did Sister Sharon think the secular world read these differing responses to the liberation theologians and the African priests? Did she think the inconsistency sent a message to the world that the Church is more concerned

with doctrinal purity and protecting its male clergy than with the sexual abuse of nuns?

"People don't understand that the Church is one of the strongest voices in the world speaking out against the abuse of women, the trafficking in women," she said. "Of course, we need to do more, but we are definitely on the side of the women of the world, wherever they're oppressed."

I asked her what concerned her most about the state of American religious life. "I'm worried that there's too little emphasis on community," she said, "too many sisters living alone when they don't really have to. I don't think this is a good thing."

After my visit with Sister Sharon I wondered if my enthusiasm for the lives of the nuns I had enjoyed spending time with was an aberration, like a preference for arugula and dark chocolate when most of the world was happy with iceberg lettuce and Milky Ways. I realized that Sister Sharon would be most comfortable with the nuns I had spoken to whom I found the most difficult to approach—two nuns I interviewed in Brooklyn, one a Nigerian, one an Argentine. Perhaps they were most representative of the contemporary Church, which is, after all, the church of John Paul II, not of John XXIII, who has been dead nearly forty years. As America is now the country of George W. Bush, not of John F. Kennedy.

Sister Miriam Therese, the Nigerian, and Sister Angelus, the Argentine, share Sister Sharon's view that the hyper-individualism of American society has both discouraged vocations to the religious life and impaired the faithful fulfillment of such vocations. Both of them think that American women have too much freedom to take on the three Evangelical vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Sister Miriam Therese believes that American bishops like having African nuns in their dioceses because those nuns are more traditional in their outlook. She thinks that missing mass on Sunday is a mortal sin—a concept rejected by most liberal and moderate theologians. And Sister Angelus's order, The Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matara, has taken a fourth vow, of "enslavement to the Blessed Virgin Mary"; her monastery is dedicated to prayer for the conversion of Jews. Responses like this called up my limitations and failures as an investigative reporter. I never succeeded in getting either of these sisters past the language of official response.

Sister Miriam Therese, who teaches in the Greenpoint section of Brooklyn and is studying for her master's degree in education, contends that "it is more difficult for African sisters than for American sisters to say no to something the bishop wants." There is an increasingly widespread phenomenon called "reverse evangelization"; whereas traditionally priests and nuns were sent from Europe and North America to serve the needs of developing countries, the migratory pattern is now in the opposite direction. African priests and sisters are an increasingly visible presence in American parishes and schools. Even Tony Soprano's parish, in New Jersey, has an African priest.

Sister Miriam Therese declines to be critical of American nuns, and says she is "most edified by their work." But Sister Angelus thinks the fact that so many American sisters don't live in community with other sisters "opens them up to many difficult temptations." Her order, which is almost pre-conciliar in style (except for its adoption of e-mail and the rhetoric of the current Pope), has many new postulants, forty this year, all of them under thirty-five. Sister Miriam Therese says that many women in Africa want to be nuns, because they believe it is a good way of going to heaven, and because nuns are honored in their societies, by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Neither of these sisters thinks that her way of life is dying.



From Rome, I took a plane to Bucharest to visit some nuns Celia had told me about, members of her order, the Sisters of Sion, whose story had gripped me. Romania went Communist in 1945, and almost immediately a reign of terror began, culminating in the mad rule of Nicolae Ceaușescu, who wielded absolute power from 1965 until his violent overthrow, in 1989.

Catholics are a religious minority in Romania, making up only about 10 percent of the population. Starting in 1948, Communist anti-religious fervor, mingled with paranoia about foreign influence, fueled a campaign to suppress Catholic religious orders. The property of the orders was confiscated; convents and monasteries were closed; those who lived in them were sent back to their families. But a group of Sisters of Sion, among others, kept their religious life alive underground while working in factories, on farms, or as domestic servants. Though often interrogated and harassed, they lived this double life for more than forty years, until 1990, when the repression was lifted.

A friend of Celia's, Rosemarie Wesolowski, a German member of the order who is also a physician, had recently arrived in Romania to help the Sisters of Sion integrate into the larger, modern world. The congregation includes around thirty older sisters, who joined before or during the repression, and six younger ones, who entered in 1990 or later. "Theologically," Celia told me, "they're still in 1948. And yet they are heroic."

Rosemarie suggested by e-mail that I come to Iasi, a small city in the largely agricultural province of Moldavia, where she was living. She would arrange for me to talk to both the older and the younger sisters. When she met me at the Bucharest airport, her looks surprised me. She was younger than I had expected, a large, fair woman with the rosy skin of a Dürer maiden. She was the only nun I'd met with long hair, which was clipped by a metal barrette and hung down her back. When she discovered I was staying at the Hilton, she responded with laughter. "Go for it," she said. I learned that this is her favorite English expression.

She had been in Romania for only six months. In that time she had, in addition to her other duties, started a counseling center, focusing on pregnancy prevention and help for battered women. There are no shelters for battered women in Iasi, although because alcoholism is a huge problem in Romania, so is battering. But her principal job was to evaluate the local community and to give the worldwide congregation her suggestions for its future.

She understood the anomaly of this. At forty, she is one of the younger members of the order worldwide, and she has no memory of a pre-conciliar Church. Meanwhile, the majority of her sisters in Romania, coming out of a time warp, have no experience of a Church touched by Vatican II.

I spent more than a week in Rosemarie's company, and in that time I learned her remarkable history. She entered the Sisters of Sion at twenty-four, after finishing her medical training. She has lived and worked as a doctor in many places: Frankfurt, Geneva, Vienna, Egypt, Ethiopia, Jerusalem, Brooklyn, and Chicago. She chose the Sisters of Sion because she believed that as a post-war German, she had a particular responsibility to witness the importance of Yaweh's covenant with the Jewish people, to stand with those who honored its importance in the life of Christianity.

I asked Rosemarie some of the questions I had put to the other nuns. Her understanding of her way of life, her sense of the meaning of her vows, is rooted, as are the others', in personal history. "I'm making a statement by my communal life about the possibilities for reconciling difference," she told me. "Because I do not choose whom I live with, there must be constant reconciliations. I go where I'm needed by the community. I live simply and I don't



own things. I am celibate, which for me, believe me, has not always been easy. When you are a doctor, you work closely beside men, sometimes very attractive. But I believe I am called to live my life as a celibate, and as Jeremiah says, the word of God can sometimes feel very violent.”

Her job in Romania was very much on her mind. She needed to examine the quality of the vocations of the younger sisters, making sure, as she put it, that “it’s a calling from God and not just a career move.” The younger sisters were all from poor rural families; they had moved from simple houses to convents with private bathrooms and washing machines. They were all studying for teaching degrees.

“When I first arrived, they would use the word ‘children’ about themselves,” Rosemarie told me. “I would say, ‘We don’t have children in the Sisters of Sion; we have independent women.’ I must work with them to see if our order really makes sense for them. Independence and individual responsibility are very important in our order. I have to try and determine with the younger sisters if they would be better off in a more traditional order. For instance, a Romanian bishop has recently founded a religious institute called The Servants of the High Priest Jesus Christ. Their mission is to be domestic servants to priests. They appeal to a lot of younger women: two hundred nuns in less than ten years.”

Of the six sisters who entered after the fall of communism, four are living in the convent at Iasi. One, Paulina, is fifty-two, the eldest by seventeen years. Ecaterina is thirty-five, Christina twenty-eight, and Maria twenty-seven. Maria and Christina, who are first cousins, have lived together since they entered the order, in 1993. Christina has a sweet, almost babyish face; Maria is stronger-looking, plainer. Ecaterina is angular; her face can look angry, but then she smiles, her tension dissolving into eagerness. These three wear habits and veils.

I spoke first to Paulina. She sat across from me at the dining-room table in the convent—a beautiful, sad-faced woman with light-hazel eyes, a tan face, a strong, graceful body, and short, naturally wavy gray hair. I asked her how she came to be here. She said that in her town there was a nun, Sister Ludovica, one of the Sisters of Sion. Paulina was drawn to her because of her calm, her kindness, her willingness to talk to people about Scripture, about her life, about their lives. She never spoke badly of anyone. Sister Ludovica was often interrogated by the police. When she spoke of her mentor, Paulina began to cry.

Ever since she was ten, Paulina had wanted to be a nun. But when she spoke to Sister Ludovica about it, her mentor told her that it was impossible in Romania, and that she should forget it. But Paulina made a private vow of celibacy, and she kept alive the dream of nunhood. She worked in a sheet-metal factory, and later in the fields, all the while living with her mother. In 1990, having dreamed of joining the Church for more than thirty years, she was finally able to start her novitiate. In 1991 she began caring for the older Sisters of Sion in a nearby town. There she read for the first time the documents of Vatican II, then almost thirty years old. In 1992 she moved to Iasi. When I asked Paulina why she didn’t wear a habit, she said, “I didn’t wait thirty years for a habit. I waited for a religious life.”

How to explain the strength of what Paulina would call a vocation, what most modern people would call a dream? How to describe Paulina’s smile, which irradiates the calm plain of her face like a pool in a fertile field suddenly struck by sunlight? It is a smile of hope and quiet pleasure: an expression of almost incredulous gratitude for being, after years of great patience, finally in the right place.

While we ate lunch, I asked Maria, Christina, and Ecaterina to tell their

In Romania a group of Sisters of Sion kept their religious life alive underground while working in factories, on farms, or as domestic servants. They lived this double life for more than forty years.

To my surprise, the sisters all ordered beer. Almost immediately Christina got rosy and giggly. Maria swayed to the music. She asked if I would like to dance with her; women, she told me, often dance together in Romania.

stories. Maria and Christina were from the same village as Paulina, and also knew Sister Ludovica. But they had been frightened of her and found her harsh. They came of age after the Communist collapse, so they were able to meet openly with other sisters for prayer and Bible study. Maria, the more talkative, said she knew very early that she didn't want to marry. Neither had much to say about what drew them to the Sisters of Sion. "We wanted to serve God," Maria said, answering for both. They went through high school in the Sion community; now they are studying to be kindergarten teachers.

Ecaterina was older than Maria and Christina when she entered the order, in her late twenties. She worked in a textile factory and deliberated for two years about entering religious life. She, too, knew she never wanted to marry. She, too, wanted to serve God.

Frustrated with the emotionally flat tone of their responses, I asked them if they believed that women should be ordained, expecting the topic to be provocative. The three young sisters laughed. "We knew it would come to this, this question," Maria said. She argued that women have their proper sphere and should not step out of it. Ecaterina was more vehement: she said that the line of succession was passed from Saint Peter to the Apostles, and that only men can continue the line. She said she believed that women are emotionally unfit to become priests, and that the idea of a pregnant woman saying mass was disgusting.

Gently Paulina suggested that Ecaterina might find it disgusting because she had never seen it. Change is always difficult and frightening, Paulina said. It would be fine with her if women became priests, although she does not think it will happen in her lifetime.

The women asked me why so few young men are becoming priests in the West. I suggested that celibacy is particularly difficult for men. I told them that the priesthood has been racked by scandals of sexual abuse and homosexuality. In general, fewer Catholics go to church regularly now; the Church's ban on contraception has made many of them feel distrustful and abandoned. "It is not the Church that has abandoned them, but they who have abandoned the Church," Christina said. "They can always confess their sins and be taken back." Ecaterina added, "If Westerners can't live up to the demands, then we will have to be missionaries to them. Here we have many vocations."

Later Rosemarie told me that the younger Romanian sisters didn't believe a word I had said. They all thought it was wrong for sisters to be engaged in such conversations.

After lunch we went to the apartment of Maria Gabor, another Sister of Sion, which fulfilled all my preconceptions of Eastern bloc grimness. The glass was missing from the front window; the stairway was littered and unlit. I was surprised when a young man answered the door; it was Maria's nephew, who lives with her. We walked into the sitting room, which was dominated by a dining table. On the wall was Technicolor religious art: *The Last Supper* in aquarium shades, an effeminate Jesus pointing to a coral-colored heart. On a shelf were statues of the Madonna, the Little Flower, three china dogs. Across from *The Last Supper* a computer and a printer were oddly out of place in this cluttered room.

Maria is a tiny woman of seventy-one, toothless and stooped. She wore a mid-calf navy skirt, a white shirt, a green-and-yellow babushka. Born in a small village in Moldavia, she knew she wanted to be a nun because of the nuns who came home on holiday to visit their families. She used some of the same language to describe these nuns that Paulina had: they were calm, talked more quietly than other women, didn't speak ill of people. I could only wonder at the

difference between these nuns and other women in the village, who were probably overworked, producing a baby a year, at the mercy of a husband perhaps brutal, perhaps merely in charge.

By the time Maria came of age, religious orders had been suppressed. But she retained a strong desire to be a nun, to devote her whole life to serving God. So she, too, made a private vow of celibacy. In her thirties she moved to Iasi, where she worked in a textile factory. In the parish she met a woman named Rosina, who she only gradually discovered was a nun. Sister Rosina worked as a nurse in a hospital; she was under suspicion by the police, who would often tail and sometimes even interrogate her. When Maria and Rosina spoke, they had to go outdoors to an isolated place. Often they met in a local cemetery. In 1970 Maria made private vows to a priest in a confessional in the cemetery chapel. She met occasionally with Sister Rosina and two other women, also secret nuns. But to the world she was a single pious woman working in a factory. Even her mother didn't know the truth. Once, her mother was questioned by the police about why Maria wasn't married; but because she didn't know her daughter was a nun, the investigation proved fruitless.

After the religious orders were reinstated, Maria's life didn't much change. She moved in with her sister and her sister's children, because she felt she was needed there. This surprised me; I asked her if she had longed to wear a habit and live in community. "No," she said. "I felt I could do more good helping my family. And if I wore a habit, it would be strange for the people who knew me all those years. As if I had become a different person. I don't need a habit to love God and serve people."

The next day I traveled with Rosemarie to Sabaoni, three hours by bus from Iasi, where the order has a kindergarten and a convent. Later, as I was resting in my room at the convent, reading, there was a knock on the door, and an old woman burst, almost jumped, in. It was Sister Ana Marta, a joyful force, in the room, which was cold even in May. I was reminded of the words that compared the presence of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost to a rushing wind that enlivened the Apostles. Sister Ana Marta embraced and kissed me, enthusiastic that we would speak Italian to each other. Although she was born in Romania, she has lived most of her life in Italy. She left Romania during World War II, was trained in France, moved to Trieste and then to Rome, where she ran schools. At the age of seventy-three she returned to Romania to help the new community of sisters, and today, at eighty, she is in charge of the kindergarten. Later she told me that she was puzzled by the attitude of the younger sisters: they seemed so joyless, to have such a sense of entitlement. She said that one of the younger sisters, miffed that her request for a car had been denied, said to her, "But Jesus said, 'Whatever you give will be given back to you a hundredfold.'" I told her I didn't think Jesus meant cars.

At dinner I was introduced to several more nuns, who wanted to tell me their stories. Each of them wore a habit, complete with veil. Sister Josepha, toothless and in her seventies, spoke first. Her convent had been broken into by the Communists in 1948. All the books were thrown into the street and burned; then the police sent the nuns home to their families. At first her family didn't want her—another mouth to feed. The family had two horses, and they sold one to buy her a sewing machine. Sister Josepha is very proud that her tailoring raised her family's status and economic well-being. "And I did it all with only four years of education," she told me. "Not like these young ones who think they know so much." She had no contact with other sisters until 1991, when she put on the habit for the first time in forty-three years and rejoined her community.

Sister Florenta is the only nun I have heard brag about the men whose





sexual advances and marriage proposals she refused so that she could join the order. She also boasted about having been beaten by the police, because of her brave resistance. Her presentation, her desire to lord it over the others, made me uneasy.

Another sister, also called Christina, told her story, encouraged by Rosemarie. She had wanted to be a nun from a young age, and with the support of a hometown priest, she moved to Iasi. There she met Sister Rosina, who urged her to join the Sisters of Sion. She made her vows secretly, like the others, knowing that she and the other women who met with Sister Rosina were under surveillance; she even suspected that the confessionals were bugged. After the fall of the Communists the sisters discovered that Rosina had brought a total of twenty-two women into the order, but none of them had known that at the time. They each knew one or, at most, two other secret nuns.

A radiant smile came over Sister Christina's face. "Those years, those difficult years, were nevertheless full of joy," she said. "I told no one that I had a religious life. Even my family didn't know. It was a very beautiful, very wonderful secret I had with God alone."

Sister Ana Marta burst in excitedly, "You found the absolute."

"Yes," Sister Christina said. "I did." Now she works in a school where she and another sister teach Gypsy children. As she described her work, she revealed the negative attitudes many Romanians have toward Gypsies. I looked at these nuns, and other than Ana Marta they seemed to me ordinary women, with the ordinary faults and limitations of their time and class—except for the fact that under the extraordinary pressures of history they had done extraordinary things. They had put themselves in danger to keep alive a way of life that was only a hint, a shadow of itself, practiced in secrecy. They had lived a life of trust in a society in which trust was nearly unimaginable. I asked myself, Is it possible to act extraordinarily and yet not be transformed into an extraordinary person?

When we got back to Iasi, Rosemarie suggested that I invite Maria, Christina, and Ecaterina to dinner in a restaurant. When I proposed it, they were excited in a way that reminded me of young children being taken to the city for an outing. None of them had been to a restaurant in the years they had been in Iasi.

The restaurant they chose must once have been a splendid *fin de siècle* place. Later it may well have been the dark hangout of the security police and their bought girls. The high ceilings, the elaborate moldings, were grimy and crumbling, and there was a smelly, spotted carpet on the floor. Light bulbs were missing from the overhead fixtures. A guitarist and a keyboardist played seventies-style music: "Feelings," "Save the Last Dance for Me." Then they moved with an anachronistic swoop into "Them There Eyes."

To my surprise, the sisters all ordered beer. Almost immediately Christina got rosy and giggly. Maria swayed to the music. I asked her if she liked to dance. Yes, she said, very much. I said I did too. She asked if I would like to dance with her; women, she told me, often dance together in Romania. And so I danced with a nun who probably considered me heretical, in a dispiriting room of former glory and former intrigue, next to men in nylon shirts stretching over their beer bellies and excessively made-up women with cheaply dyed hair and tacky, excruciatingly high heels.

The nuns ordered meat dishes (a luxury for them), salad, and dessert. They seemed very happy. It was almost midnight when we left. The municipal bus didn't come, so we hailed a private minivan, which stopped several times to pick up more passengers—so many that the last two half stood, half crouched in the space between the seats.

Back at the convent Maria reminded me that I had promised to teach her the tango. After I showed her a few steps, Ecaterina and Christina wanted to

learn too. Then they spoke to each other in Romanian, and Ecaterina fetched a boom box and a cassette. They played Romanian music and said they wanted to teach me their native dances. We were all giggly, and I was dizzy with the spinning that is an essential part of their dances. They spun me and spun me until we were all laughing very loudly, a bit out of control. Rosemarie, who doesn't dance, watched from a bench in the hallway.

It was after one o'clock in the morning, and I had to wake in three hours to catch the train to Bucharest. But I couldn't get them to stop dancing. I said to Maria, the best dancer among them, "You look like you've spent many a night dancing." A shutter came down over her happiness. "Not really, no," she said disapprovingly.

I was glad I hadn't said what was on the tip of my tongue: "The way you dance, you must have Gypsy blood."

If it is not a fantasy, what is the idea of a nun? It is so strong that it can inspire a group of women to keep it alive during a murderous dictatorship, so potent and so large that women as different as spiky Janet and traditional Sister Angelus can recognize themselves by it, and Sister Miriam Therese can feel at home in an alien continent because of it. The image is so evocative that it moves a gay agnostic friend of mine to weep uncontrollably when he sees a friend take the veil. It is amorphous enough that the two Benedictines from Rwanda can still think of themselves as nuns.

In *Finding the Treasure*, Sandra Schneiders defines a nun's life as "the total commitment to Christ in lifelong consecrated celibacy lived in community and mission." I can't imagine anyone's having a problem with community and mission. But then there is celibacy.

Possibly I come from the cohort least disposed of any in history to accept celibacy. Women like me, who came of age in the sixties, believed that sex had been kept from us, that our rightful pleasures had been denied us. We had been lied to for centuries about the strength and range of our desires and our satisfactions. It wasn't that celibacy was always in the back of my mind when I talked to nuns; but it never ceased to be a puzzle.

People look at me suspiciously when I talk to them about the happiness of the nuns I've spoken to, as if I've regressed to a point of infantilism. It takes real courage for me to say, however tentatively, to the people I know: Since Freud, we all believe that sex makes one if not happy, then whole. But look at these women's lives. How can we understand that even without sex they are happy, and whole, and free? Freer than many of my friends. Although, like most of my friends, I don't quite understand why.

Often in recent months I have felt as if I were floating in a lake fed by two streams: the stream of my admiration for these women and the stream of my incomprehension of the totality of their lives.

How can we speak to each other over the gulf of a life not lead?

This journey into the world of nuns has not been without pain. "Put your tears in it," Celia said to me when I told her that I often found myself crying as I wrote about these women. Tears for the end of something. Tears for the neglected parts of my own life.

To give up the idea of the higher calling. The one right way.

To leave behind the book and the stiff, uncaressable doll.

To get beyond the old, dead images in favor of what Vatican II called "the freedom of what is unsettled."

The grip of a past that will no longer serve. The risk of partial understanding. ▀

Often in recent months I have felt as if I were floating in a lake fed by two streams: the stream of my admiration for these women and the stream of my incomprehension of the totality of their lives.

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THREE POEMS *by Ellen Bryant Voigt*

.....

LESSON

Whenever my mother, who taught
small children forty years,
asked a question, she
already knew the answer.
“Would you like to” meant
you would. “Shall we” was
another, and “Don’t you think.”
As in “Don’t you think
it’s time you cut your hair.”

So when, in the bare room,
in the strict bed, she said,
“You want to see?” her hands
were busy at her neckline,
untying the robe, not looking
down at it, stitches
bristling where the breast
had been, but straight at me.

I did what I always did:
not weep—she never wept—
and made my face a kindly
whitewashed wall, so she
could write, again, whatever
she wanted there.

PRACTICE

To weep unbidden, to wake
at night in order to weep, to wait
for the whisker on the face of
the clock
to twitch again, moving
the dumb day forward—

is this merely practice?
Some believe in heaven,
some in rest. *We’ll float,*
you said. *Afterward*
we’ll float between two worlds—

five bronze beetles
stacked like spoons in one
peony blossom, drugged by lust:
if I came back as a bird
I’d remember that—

until everyone we love
is safe is what you said.

THE OTHERS

Our two children grown, now
is when I think
of the others:
two more times

the macrocephalic sperm battered
its blunt cell forward, rash
leap to the viscous egg—

marriage
from our marriage, earth and fire—
and what then,
in the open

synapse from God’s finger
to Adam’s hand?
The soul
sent back:

our lucky
or unlucky lost, of whom
we never speak.

BURN YOUR MAPS

A short story

BY ROBYN JOY LEFF

.....

Six days after Halloween my nine-year-old, Wes, is still dressing in the furry, puffed-out uniform of a Mongolian nomad. He goes to school in the bushy fake fez he ordered off the Internet, tromps across the light Portland snow in his bloated felt boots. What seemed impossibly clever at the end of October has by November grown a bit disconcerting. We threw the gap-toothed pumpkin out two days ago, and Wes merely yawned. But just try to touch his hat—say, to wash his hair—and he turns all claws and parental condemnations.

Wes's father, Connor, is more annoyed than troubled by this unexpected detour into Ulan Bator. Connor, who sells next-generation CAT- and PET-scan equipment to major medical centers, survives on his ability to make up other people's minds, to blunt dissent with reason.

At dinner he shouts at our son, one word at a time: "Who are you?"

"I'm a yak herder, sir."

"Who are you really, though?"

Wes considers the question carefully. "For now," he says, "you can call me Baltnai."

Connor refuses to call his son Baltnai. On the seventh day, at breakfast, we all sit in silence and glare: I at Connor, Connor at Wes, Wes at no one in particular. When Wes is in the bathroom, Connor seriously suggests that we stage a midnight raid, rip off the kid's costume while he's asleep, and toss it in the trash compactor. End of Mongolian story.

"A fledgling imagination is at stake here," I say. "We can't just crush it."

"I've got this weird stomach thing again," Connor says, tossing away his pumpernickel bagel. "Every morning."

"Connor, he's only nine. The developing brain is wacky."

"Wes is not going to be wacky."

I touch my hand to his shoulder. "What I'm saying is, he has a lot of good reasons."

Wes comes out of the bathroom dragging a huge ball of toilet paper, at least three quarters of the roll, wrapped into

an amorphous blob and hitched to his wrist with mint-flavored floss.

"What in the world are you doing?" Connor asks.

"Now I have a flock," Wes says. "A little lamb."

"What about Ethel?" I worry all the time about my son's fading allegiance to our elderly dachshund, about his breaking her very fine heart.

"She's a dog. This is a lamb."

"You're not dragging that pile of crap to school," Connor says with a snort.

"It's not a pile of crap," Wes states, entirely cool. "And Dad, even in Mongolia sheep don't go to school."

In our usual routine, Connor drops Wes in front of Hawkins Elementary and me at the equally dour-looking community center. Wes gets a kiss, but I don't.

"Why don't you ask one of your freaky child-psych friends," he says when I'm already halfway out of the car.

"Connor, you're making too big a deal. Do you know my brother swore he was Spider-Man for a month? One day he started up our garage and he actually thought his hands would stick. The fucking moron broke his leg, pissed off my dad, and ended the superhero summer."

"Lovely. Your brother. Alise, let me ask you something." Connor doesn't even turn off NPR. "You ever had any Mongolian students?"

"Probably. We cover the globe here in the Pacific Northwest."

"You think that has anything to do with it?"

"It's going to be my fault now—is that the concept?" I zip my jacket high over my throat.

"It's just a question," Connor says. "A line of inquiry."

"It was a National Geographic Special, Con. That's what Wes says. Ask him yourself, Mr. Inquiry."

"That damned Discovery Channel," Connor says. "They act as if all information is equal."

"I think it's TBS," I say.

"He watches too much TV as it is," Connor says.

"Con, it's not like we let him watch *Wild Police Videos*."

"Let's review this later," he says.

"Have a nice day," I say.

I teach English as a Second Language. My students come from Mongolia or Turkey or Laos, yet I rarely know it. They are the tired, the huddled, the oddly uniform masses who yearn for Oprah and Wolfgang Puck and Intel. They all wear Gap-ish clothing, even if it's secondhand or Kmart. They bring lunches that have nothing to do with where they come from—the Polish woman eats supermarket sushi, the Japanese teenager downs a burger, the Somali carries in boxes of Chinese takeout and snakes cold spicy noodles into his mouth with his equally serpentine fingers.

I used to love all this, used to get off on the very odor of

He is a Pakistani in his forties, short, and lean. He was an engineer in his former life—something to do with mines, I believe, though I fantasize that he is a bridge builder. Earlier in the quarter I asked my students to write a short essay titled "My Advice to New Immigrants Coming to the USA." I got a lot of funny answers—"There are many bad drivers." "Bring earplugs." "You must have some lucky." "Eat ketchup, yum."—but Ismail's actually stopped me in my tracks. He wrote,

Throw out all maps. Rip them from your books. Rip them from your heart. Or they will break it. I guarantee. Toss all globes from the roof until you have plastic pieces. Burn any atlas. You can't understand them anyway. They are offensive, like fairy tales from another tribe. The lines make no sense and no longer make mountains. You have come to the land where no one looks back. Remember, don't look back. Don't look out the window. Don't dare turn your head. You could grow dizzy. You could fall down. Throw out all your maps. Burn them.

I asked him to stay after class the day I returned the papers. I underlined the A on his essay twice.

"Your essay was so poetic and so sad," I said. "Your written English is quite excellent."

"Yes, it is for crying," he said. "I am this year forty-five, but I am learning like an American boy. Every day I see MTV. Now I rap better than talk. You enjoy Snoop Doggy Dogg, teacher?"

I snorted. He wasn't the gloomy or downtrodden sort I'd expected. "I don't know, we're more into 'NSync at my house.

Tell me, Ismail, what are you hoping to do here in America? Return to engineering?"

"No, not one chance. I want to have a coffee shop. Coffee makes all the world happy."

"Not me, actually. Burns my stomach."

He frowned. "For you, for you then, teacher, we have something very special. We have sweet milk, or mint tea, or a drink of almonds. No worries. We make you happy. We will. No doubts."

For some reason in that moment I believed him, and we became friends after that, talking after class about the vagaries of Portland's traffic laws, about the cultural accuracy of *The Godfather*, sometimes even about Connor and Wes. Ismail never talked about his own family, and I didn't push in that area. After all, he was a man who advocated throwing away all maps—and what were families if not sharp demarcations in the flesh?



the classroom—a volatile magic of knockoff perfumes, ethnic spices, and cheap wet leather. I could smell the hunger to fit in, to regenerate into fatter, tanner, more legend-worthy versions of themselves, and it aroused me intellectually. I wanted to feed that hunger, wanted to snake American customs and social niceties and the correct use of adjectives into their heads like so many cold spicy noodles. But that was before burnout set in, before I saw too many of my students get nowhere or get terminally frustrated or get deported, their well-taught English turned to spite.

This year, for the first time in a long while, I have a favorite. I actually find myself bouncing to class, pleased to sit authoritatively behind my desk waiting for Ismail to walk in, always with that loose neon-blue backpack bumping toward his high ass, always with the slightest, smoothest shift of the eyes, always catching my eyes with the very corner of his.

But on this day, when all the others have shuffled from the room with their admittedly cushy assignment to write a New Year's party menu, I sit on the floor next to Ismail's folding chair and say, "I've never asked, but do you have children?"

"What do you mean with 'have'?" He smiles slyly. It is impossible to know if he is teasing, playing the coy student.

"Are you a father?"

"Of course," he answers. "But my children, they are not with me in my home. So I think I do not 'have' them, as you say."

"Oh," I say. "I'm sorry, then."

"That's no problem," he says. "But you. I think you look very bad. Unhappy."

"No sleep. My son is acting a little weird, and my husband is angry."

"Anger is for husbands," Ismail says with a shrug. "That is the way."

"I know, but this is different. We disagree about Wes. About how best to raise him. You understand?"

Ismail, perched above me in his chair, lowers a hand, seemingly toward my hair, and then lets it slide away. "In this country," he says, "I cannot imagine to be a father. Your problems, they are so—" I think he's going to say "ridiculous"—"decadent."

"Well, Wes wants to be a Mongolian."

"What do you mean by this?" Ismail is no less confused than I.

"He wears a little tunic and pretends he's from Inner Asia. I don't know why—something he saw on TV or read on the Internet. It struck him as, I don't know, a kind of home."

"Mongolia? Like, as in, Mongolia?"

"Yeah, Mongolia."

"Shitty Mongolia?" Ismail shouts. "Dirty, ugly, poor Mongolia?"

We both start to laugh, the kind of musical laughter that feeds on itself, until Ismail puts a long finger to his stilled top lip and settles himself deep into the impossibly flimsy-looking chair beneath him.

It always ends this way. No matter how Ismail and I begin our conversations, they always complete themselves just like this. We both shut up and just sit together. We don't look in each other's eyes. We don't touch. We just slump, staring into space, breathing lightly, together. At first I found it quite odd, disturbing, indefinite; but now I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't some previously undiscovered form of love.

Wes leads his toilet-paper sheep to the dinner table on night No. 7. Connor makes strange faces at me, curling and crushing his lips.

"I met a neurosurgeon from the Ukraine today," he begins, spinning yet another tale of M.D. heroics for Wes's future benefit. "He was all of five foot one, ugly little guy, but they

say he has magical hands. He can make precise movements of a millimeter or less. You know how big that is?"

"Has he been to Mongolia?" Wes asks.

"Didn't ask. He uses something called a gamma knife. To blast right through tumors. Is that cool or what?"

"Mongolia isn't that far from the Ukraine," Wes points out.

"How was it in Mongolia today?" I ask.

Connor clicks his tongue at me.

"It was cold," Wes says, "but then, it always is. It was windy, too. It's almost time for *dzud*."

"What's *dzud*?"

"It means the slow white death," Wes says.

"Jesus," Connor says. "Are you okay with this?" He is pointing his fork at me, a piece of spinach waving limply.

"Wes," I say, ignoring Connor, "what is it you like so much about being Mongolian?"

He squints at me. "Can I sleep on the stairs tonight?"

"Why, Wes?"

"Baltai," he corrects. "Because that's where the Mongolians live. On the steps."

"That's s-t-e-p-p-e, you know. It means a plateau, like a high, flat piece of land."

"I know what it is, Mom," he says, in the fierce way of smart boys. "But since I'm here, I got to do what I can to be there."

"Name me one reason," Connor says before bed. I could name him three, not the least of which is that we are on the verge of separation. On the verge, we say, as if it were a bungee-jumping platform, as if we could just step backward at any point and laugh at what we almost did. But I don't want to start that talk tonight, so I say, "Grandpa Firth."

"Absurd," Connor says. He is lying on top of the covers in his briefs, fingertips jammed just under the band, which incongruously screams JOE BOXER. He doesn't look as if he could sell firewood to an Eskimo. He looks like a little boy himself. He turns to the right and hugs the bottom of his naked ribs. I toss his half of the blanket over him. He shrinks to a lump beneath it.

"Slow white death," I say. "You think that's a coincidence?"

"Alise," he says.

Two months ago Connor's father died in our television room, surrounded by hospital equipment and cases of Ensure. Before that we saw Grandpa Firth maybe once every other year, guilted into occasional holidays. Wes barely knew him. Hell, I barely knew him. Connor used to say he didn't want him spreading his lies to Wes. I knew only that Connor was like a nine-year-old himself in the old man's presence.

"You don't see the connection?"

"Between my old man and Mongolia? You're just pushing any button you can find."

"No—I mean, maybe there's something there. About the

incredible transience of human contact. Or something. I mean, I don't know what I mean."

"No shit, Sherlock."

He shuffles and moves in closer, his skin sharp with cold, igniting that lingering instinct to warm what's next to you. It's almost as though we could drop this whole pretense of so many years, wiggle into one another, make sweat-happy teenage love. Instead I slide the sole of a foot onto his icy calf.

"I think Grandpa Firth told Wes that he used to be a CIA agent in Singapore."

"I'd say it was the chemo talking, but that was him. In translation, he meant he once had too many drinks in a bar in Singapore."

"I'm just saying that Wes liked his stories. He's got that storytelling thing now. It's like an addiction."

"My dad was real good with addictions."

"It kills you that anyone could like Will Firth, doesn't it?"

Connor wriggles a little. "You're so wrong it's hilarious, Alise. That's the only thing around here I'm happy about. Wes was the only one who ever made my dad—" He clears his throat as if he's going to cry, but of course he doesn't. "But you know," he goes on, "maybe it's you, and the way you give him so much freedom. He lacks a sense of that one thing Will Firth gave me—boundaries."

I snort, but then suddenly I'm the one who's crying. Lightly, but still crying.

Boundaries. Borders. Maps. I retreat fully from Connor's body, drop my foot off his warming leg, tuck into full fetal position. It could be worse, I suppose. I have a friend, a child psychologist as it happens, who keeps separate bedrooms with her artist husband. He has sleep issues, Krista tells me, and he can't fall asleep if someone else is in the room. So once every two weeks or so they come to each other to make love, but she tells me it's like visiting a stranger's bed: they are awkward and silly, and when they're done, they wipe up and return to their separate islands.

Separate islands, my brain sings near sleep. Then, before I drop off, I begin to wonder just how many young nomad boys in the heart of Inner Mongolia—*most? 50 percent?*—are lying in their yurts right now humming to the Backstreet Boys on some Walkman a tourist left behind, fully engaged in the reverse of Wes's fantasy, certain they were meant to be born American.

I'm sure I have plenty of culpability. Unlike Connor, I don't consider myself that free a parent. Wes may watch some TV shows but not others. A 9:00 P.M. bed curfew is enforced. I've spanked him several times, but never with premeditation. My worst sin may be that I have spent so many nights on Wes's bedcovers, my favorite globe spinning under my fingers. Ismail's nightmare, our little game.

"It's all so close together," Wes said, giggling, in Sep-

tember, because that's what happens when all you do is trace your finger from one land to another: the very shape of distance falls away, becomes an impossible geometry.

"That's just an illusion," I said.

It was a huge error. People of my generation feel we have good excuses for our loneliness. But what about Wes? He flicks through dozens of search-engine hits for Mongolia, and learns that the world's millions are within his reach. So how can he know it's still okay to feel that no one on earth can understand him, that no one can comfort him if he sits in his room, a micro-lump in the middle of Oregon in the middle of America in the middle of the world, losing it?

Connor doesn't speak at breakfast. He just clutches his slight paunch.

"Are you going to call the doctor?" I ask.

"About Wes?"

"About your bellyache, Con. You see a million doctors every day."

"They're head guys. I need a GI man."

"Like GI Joe," Wes says.

"GI means 'gastrointestinal' in medical talk. Like guts."

"Ew, that's gross," Wes says. He rubs his nubby wool hat violently.

"Bet your hair really itches," Connor teases.

"When it does, I meditate. It's like praying, only you do it to Buddha"—Wes says "*Butt-ah*"—"instead of God."

"Where do you get this stuff?" Connor asks.

"I don't know. Encarta and stuff."

"You know, nomads don't really have the Internet or CD-ROMs."

"Duh, Dad. They don't need it, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Everything they need is right there. They don't have to order stuff from UPS." He is unflinching, standing up to his father. Connor must secretly be proud.

"And where is everything you need, Wes?"

Wes shrugs and squints, making his features so small and pointed that I want to put him back to my breast, grow him all over again. "I don't know," he says. "Where?"

So much purpling blood pours into Connor's face that I am certain he is going to scream. But instead he shuffles quickly toward the bathroom, where he remains until we are all going to be late.

Thank God it is Friday. I'm not exactly looking forward to the weekend, with everything building to a head over Mongolia, but Friday is my student-conference day, when I meet with anyone who makes an appointment to see me. Ismail always makes an appointment.

My Friday slots are almost always filled. Most of my students come desperately seeking help—but not with their English. Today a tall, balding Sri Lankan inquires whether I know any performing-arts agents. His son has an Asian-

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techno hip-hop band, and if the kid can just snag a record contract, they'll be able to afford a bigger apartment. I tell him to try a book at the library, which makes him belly laugh for a good long minute. At least I'm useful for something.

Sometimes I think I am a fraud, because I myself can barely speak a second language. I can squeak by with some Spanish and a tad of Farsi, and I have painstakingly memorized certain Chinese characters, but I lack that magical ability some annoying linguists have to slide simply between two tongues, easing back and forth between one way of speaking and another. I admit that I am attached to the shapes my tongue makes, to the comforting way my throat opens and closes day after day.

I didn't mean to do this kind of teaching. First I wanted to be a ballet dancer, but my hips bloomed round; then I wanted to be in the Peace Corps, but I met Con; then I fantasized about becoming one of those brilliant private school matrons who mold little geniuses into men and women of the world, only that was just silly. Of course, it was the same for Connor, who wanted to be a brain surgeon but kept failing chemistry. Nothing quite turns out in our lives. But that's what gets me: there might still be a very few remote places in the world—deepest Mongolia, maybe—where a person comes to live exactly the life expected, exactly as offered. I didn't. None of my students has. Wes, child of his times already, doesn't even have a shot at it. And yet somehow it thrills me—and maybe Wes as well—to know that such a thing remains imaginable.

By 3:00 P.M. Ismail should have arrived, but he is late. In his absence I draw thin, malformed yaks on my doodle pad and think about Connor's stomach. Mostly I imagine it's a problem of emptiness. He has lost twenty pounds in the past six months, has started taking a kickboxing class on the weekends, has stopped buying ice cream. I wonder if this has affected Wes at all—his father's slipping away, disappearing, reducing himself. I wonder also if Connor is doing it for me. Is that possible? Is it wicked to hope that his ill health is rooted in thwarted passion?

When Ismail arrives, he is breathless, agitated. He walks right across my office to the window, which looks on a parking lot overgrown with peeling, rusted Subarus.

"You think *you* have some trouble," he says.

"Is something wrong?"

"Lahore has called. A son may be arrested."

I think of going to him, but I know that's not what he wants. His skin—what I can see of it—seems to sag, pulled toward the window and away from me.

"Why?"

"It is not known. Maybe some drugs, maybe some politics, maybe, I don't know how to say, crazy, crazy, crazy."

"Will you go there?"

At last he turns around, and I can see his face, which looks no different—as soft and yielding around the lips and jawline as ever, eyes still shifted to the side.

"I cannot, you see."

"Can I do anything? To help?"

He saunters back to my desk, forcing a slow grin.

"Let us discuss the *Austin Powers*," he says. "I do not get this one."

"Ismail," I say, "I can't talk about *Austin Powers* right now."

"Why so?"

"You've upset me. You're upset. It's outrageous."

He sits on top of my desk, the way a boy with a crush would. "Everything is what you say: outrageous," he says.

He's so damn glib it infuriates me. I scrunch up my doodle page, yaks and all, and throw it at him. Hard.

He glares at me, finally revealing a glint of hurt. Then he grabs a slim paperback off a shelf and hurls it at my shoulder.

I return fire with a catapulted rubber band. Ismail takes up chalk from my board and strafes my side of the desk with several pieces. One hits me square in the cheek, smarting immediately. I rise and move toward the bookshelves. A paper clip ricochets off my breast. Blindly I grab at a stapler. He takes my wrist. I take his waist.

We crumple into each other, almost hugging. But not. Our arms fall to our sides, the stapler falls to the floor, and we tremble. But we say nothing. We do not touch. We do not look in each other's eyes. We do nothing but stand there.

Finally he steps back and says, "Thank you. You are a good teacher."

"Ismail," I say.

"Shush—we cross no line," he says.

We cross no line, he says. Or at least we pretend not to. You choose your home and you burn all your maps, but that doesn't mean you might not find yourself lost and speechless where the lines fall away and the mountains blur and the silence feels better than years and years of conversation.

Ismail and I walk casually to the parking lot, talking of *Austin Powers*. "Okay," he says. "But why is this funny?"

"Analysis kills humor," I tell him.

"Why does joy break so easy? This is one shitty substance."

I see Connor in the Toyota, biting his nails. I imagine him winking at me. "Try *Groundhog Day*," I say. "And please, your son, if there's anything—"

He laughs, just like the Sri Lankan—the most frequent response to offers of assistance these days.

In the car Connor says, "That your Mongolian?"

"Oh, Lord. He's Pakistani, Con. He was wondering why *Austin Powers* is funny."

"Wrong person to ask."

"What does that mean?"

"Alise. Let's not. Hey, I talked to a doctor today."

"About your stomach?"

"About Wes. A neuropsychologist, top gun, Harvard, the whole schmeer. He says we're in trouble. We have to nip it in the bud."

"Nip what? What about your stomach?"

"He says that obsessions can literally reshape the landscape of the brain. Neurons get stuck in little pathways, draw new maps. It can be permanent."

"Does he have kids?"

"What?"

"Does he have a nine-year-old son on whom he experiments?"

"I don't know, Alise. The point is he knows the brain."

"The brain is just a bit."

"The most important bit," Connor says.

I exhale into my fist. "So what does he say we should do?"

"Take the costume."

"Take the costume," I repeat.

"Throw it away, bury it, burn it. Free Wes of the compulsion."

"Oh, Connor, that seems needlessly cruel."

"Are you saying I'm cruel?"

"Not you, Con. The idea of it."

"Just like that, you know more than the experts, huh?"

"I know my son," I say.

"I know my son too," he says.

The Toyota pulls hard to a halt in front of the library, where Wes waits inside, no doubt reading up on Mongolia. I find myself unable to undo my seat belt. Connor doesn't take his off either. We just sit there a moment, strapped in, he tapping on the dashboard, I fiddling in the cavern of my handbag for something I cannot name.

Saturday afternoon, day nine, Wes walks Ethel the dachshund up and down my back. This is a ritual we began about a year ago, when I started getting fierce cramps in my trapezius. Wes told me he'd read that Gypsies used to walk pet bears up and down people's backs for money. He has always been that kind of kid—digging up weird facts and anecdotes wherever he could find them. Nondiscriminatory about information, I guess, all of it worth paying out.

The truth is that a lot of his info is crap. But with Ethel he hit gold. She loves being the masseuse, and I can tell by the way her sweeping tail draws broad smiles up and down my torso. I, in turn, love the feeling of the paws pressing into my sinews, their animal motion so much more random and unflinching than a human rubdown. Just a walk on the back. Pure, motiveless attention.

I am grateful, as usual, after the mini-hound massage, so I brew Wes a pot of tea, since that is what he says Mongolians drink. Tea and lots of vodka, he says pointedly, but I roll my eyes, so we have Celestial Seasonings Cranberry Cove instead.

Connor is at his kickboxing class, which means that Wes and I can talk about his idea of building a *ger* in the back yard.

"It's like a tent, but it's round," he tells me. "I just need sticks and animal skins."

"Your father will have a cow," I say.

"A cow skin would be good," he says. I wish his smile would last longer.

"Wes," I say. "Are you mad at us?"

"At who?"

"At me. Or your father."

"Not really." He wrinkles his perfectly smooth face. "Not exactly."

"Are you still sad about Grandpa Firth?"

"It's okay, you know. I think he'll be reincarnated. Maybe as a Javanese rhino, but he'll be born in a zoo, because they're almost extinct."

"Wes," I say, "you've got to tell me the truth. Do you hate your life?"

"You're freaking, Mom."

"Really. You can tell me. Do you hate your life with us, with me and your dad, here in America?"

He takes a sloppy sip of tea and then smiles sympathetically at me, as if I'm a hundred moves behind him. "Silly worrywart," he says. "You guys always think it's 'cause of you. But sometimes that's not true. Sometimes a person just wants to be a Mongolian, okay?"

"Okay," I say. "If that's what you feel like."

But it's not okay, because when Connor comes home from his kickboxing class, his forehead is taut and shiny, his cheeks are fat and ruddy, and he stands in the foyer huffing.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"Stop it with the stomach."

"You seem a little off is all."

"I'm good. I had a great workout." He smells salty and smoky, like winter air.

"Good," I say. "Tougher and stronger every day."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Jesus," I say. "Can't I say something nice?" But I am thinking, *Mocking, the bane of our times, and Why don't I ever feel the instinct for niceness first anymore?*

"Let's go to the movies," he says. "It's icy as hell out there, so it won't be crowded. We'll get hot cocoa and popcorn, be a real fam."

"Okay," I say. "Let's be a real fam."

He stands there for a second. "Where's Wes?"

"In his room. On the computer, I think."

"Wes," Connor calls.

"I think he's going to be okay," I say suddenly. I don't know why.

"Wes," Connor calls in a louder voice.

"He's really such a smart kid."

He appears in front of us, a smart kid in a tunic, felt boots, and a wool fez, dragging crumpled toilet paper.

"Do you want to go to the movies?" Connor asks. "That thing with Keanu Reeves?"

"Really?"

"It's not R?" I interrupt.

"Really," Connor says.

"That's so radical, Dad. It's all CGI—computer animation, you know."

"Great. Why don't you put on your jeans and a sweater, and we'll go get the tickets."

"What do you mean?" Wes asks.

"Connor, please," I say.

"I mean, just go change into something normal, and we'll go."

"I'm a nomad, Dad. Take it or leave it."

"I'll leave it," Connor says. The edge has taken over his entire voice, lopped off the soft bits. "You can wear the hat, but the rest is history. That's my final deal."

"I'm going upstairs," Wes says, and shrugs. "I'll be on the modem. 'Night, Mommy."

"No computer," Connor says.

"What?"

"No computer until you take that stuff off."

"Mom?" Wes looks at me urgently.

"Con, let's just rent a video and have a nice night," I plead. I feel like an envoy to the Middle East, my centrist position as dangerous as any.

"I want to see a movie," Connor says.

"Well, I want to see a video," I say.

"Well, I want to have a loving wife and a sane son, but you can't always get what you want."

"Take that back." Wes jumps in his father's face now, looking fierce and ancient in his little nomad uniform. If he had a scimitar, somebody would get hurt.

"Listen, Wes—" Connor says.

"No," Wes says. "I won't. Not till you take it back."

"Take what back?"

"You know what. Take it back."

Connor bends slightly at the waist, and his knees seem to make small circles. I can see how badly he wants to take it back, how the very pull is shredding his innards. But he can't. He can't take it back because he has no more room to stash anything.

"Take it back, Dad," Wes says again in a hoarse whisper.

But his father, my husband, is paralyzed where he stands, in the foyer, at the base of the stairs. Wes pushes past us and races out the front door, whipping it shut on the beat of a sharp snuffle.

I want to say something to Connor, something he won't ever forget, but he looks so bereft that I can't imagine doing further damage. So I button my shirt to the neck and head out into air that has the essence of conscious razor blades, cutting you just for having the gall to breathe it in.

What I find first, on the Swenson's lawn, is a fur cap laced with strands of greasy hair. Then I see the tunic on a tree stump across Ashford Avenue, and the sash and the fat yellow boots near the bus stop. They have been violently strewn, ripped away. Bits of thread are everywhere in the snow, like shrapnel. I follow the line of them, contemplating

just how cold it really is, just how long it would take a naked nine-year-old boy to develop hypothermia.

It's amazing how fast he can run in the snow, as if he was born to it. My lungs are like meat in a freezer, all elasticity gone. I am forced to crawl at the bus-stop corner, because the sidewalks are far too icy to get traction with my sneakers.

I almost lose him, but near the school I find a footprint rarely seen in the snow—light as a snow angel, with individual little ellipses of toe shapes. They lead me to an anemic bush inside whose silver arms Wes is huddled, snorting snot into his trembling hands. His body is bright red, but it looks strong. As I get closer, I see that what I thought were white blisters on his belly are actually frail bubbles of water. He looks more inviolate than I ever imagined he could be.

I grab at him anyway, search his limbs for wounds, feel his baby-thin skin for aberrations. Then I catch his eyes, the whites expanding like the universe, and I see him searching for something in mine, for some reason or explanation or even just a nano-glimmer of hope that will set this all back to bearable. He begins to laugh.

"It's not funny," I protest. "You could die out here like this."

"I'm naked in the snow," he giggles. "I'm a naked Mongolian. My butt has ice on it."

This part is true. He is in shockingly dirty blue Gap briefs, which are soaked with snow and sagging off him. I start to laugh too.

We both look up and see Connor approaching, lurching and sliding and completely off kilter. When he reaches us, his chest heaves; his breath steams out his mouth.

"What in the hell are you two—" he starts, but then he stops.

That's what gets me. He stops.

"Oh, Christ, you both must be freezing," he says. "Come here."

I scoop Wes in my arms, his wet bottom drenching my shirt. Connor has had the presence of mind to take a wool coat on his way out, and now he wraps it around all three of us, making a kind of mobile cave. For the first time I realize that I am freezing, that my fingers, nipples, and nose are buzzing near numb. Inside the coat Wes and I cling to each other and to Connor's almost fiery warmth. We start walking home, three bodies moving through the night under one cloak, picking up pieces of Mongolia the whole way.

It's very quiet out. The night is so cold and so amply hushed that I can hear the constellations hum like halogen lamps. We say nothing to one another. When we get to the house, before we separate and rush for the door, for a single moment I almost speak. I almost say, "We're home."

But I cannot tell a lie. I don't know that we're home, because it's as if we don't belong anywhere on this earth, in any country, or any house, or anywhere, really, but in this ragged circle of wool. ■

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS *Grandfather's Box*

In the spring of last year my parents sold the house in which I grew up and were cleaning it out when they came across a cardboard box in the basement. No one knew where it had come from or how long it had been there, but when they opened it, they were astonished to find my grandfather.

It seems that my father's father, Abraham Rubin, who was born in Minsk in 1891 (or 1890, according to some documents) and died in Miami Beach in 1978, saved things. He started early: The box contained coins from czarist Russia, pocket notebooks filled with Yiddish words written out in one column and Russian in another, a color drawing dated 1905. An Imperial Russian passport dated January 16, 1906; a piece of stationery from the *Amerika*, on the Hamburg-Amerika Line (annotated, years later, "the ship that I came here"); a ticket for passage to New York. Letters and cards addressed in Yiddish, Russian, and English, sent to nearly a dozen addresses in Manhattan and the Bronx.

There was a draft notice dated June 15, 1917; letters to him at Camp Upton, in Yaphank, Long Island; his dog tags and shaving kit and belt and rifle case and cigarette case and spare

brass buttons and lighter and company flag and furlough train passes to New York City and a cloth face mask ("1918 epidemic and had to wear this all day") and a letter from one D. Chauncey Brewer, of The Order and Liberty Alliance, calling on him to assist in "building up a loyal spirit in the Army" among "foreign speaking men." And a life-insurance policy.

And there were discharge papers and cards from a dozen or so businesses, most of which failed (The Riverside Art Furniture Co.: "Where I invested \$500.00 and lost every cent"), and finally one from the business he would operate successfully for forty years. A passport for his parents from Republique Socialiste des Soviets de Belarousse, dated October 30, 1924. A calling card from the woman who would become my grandmother, and a wedding announcement. An invitation to the bar mitzvah of his eldest son (my uncle), in 1940. A warranty for a 1946 DeSoto. A U.S. passport. A driving-license learner's permit, issued when he was already sixty-two years old.

When I got my learner's permit, at the age of sixteen, I felt that my life had begun. By the time he got his, my grandfather had already lived several lives. —RICHARD RUBIN

TELLS

The fine art of losing at poker

BY ANDY BELLIN

Illustration by Bill Nelson

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On any given Friday night hundreds of thousands of Americans—men and women alike—pile into basements, garages, and back rooms to play their weekly poker game. Though a love for poker cuts through all social and economic distinctions, these games have a number of recognizable similarities. At every table will be someone who talks too much, someone who can't seem to deal the cards properly, someone who always spills food on the felt, and a dependable loser—that poor slob who, for the life of him, can't seem to capitalize on his strong hands and can fool no one with his weak hands. Though he probably feels unlucky, cursed by the partisan poker gods, his lack of success has a more reasonable explanation: through some subtle, unconscious action—a smirk or a cough or a nervous little laugh—that guy's giving his cards away. He's got what is known in the poker vernacular as a “tell.”

My close friend Steve and I spent the last week of August, 1984, at my grandmother's place in the Adirondack Mountains. Even at an awkward sixteen, Steve had a gift for finding women no matter where he was. He had a girlfriend at the time, to whom he was supposed to be faithful, but for as long as I've known him, his claims to monogamy have been suspect. On this summer trip he managed to conjure up a female companion from the limited population of Paul Smiths, New York, and to spend most of his six-day vacation with her. The night we got home, Steve and I met his girlfriend and some other friends at a restaurant. He walked up to the table and kissed her passionately. She looked him in the eye and said, “I can't believe you cheated on me again.”

After the obligatory exchange of accusations and denials Steve finally confessed to his infidelity and groveled for forgiveness. A few hours later she accepted his apology, and they went on to another glorious three weeks of being together. After receiving absolution that night, Steve asked

his girlfriend how she had figured out his indiscretion so quickly.

“Easy,” she said. “First, you didn't look at me while you were walking over to the table. You were staring at the ground the whole time. Second, you kissed me like you were some porn star. And to top it all off, once I accused you of cheating on me, all you did was smile and blink.” I looked over at Steve while she was saying this; sure enough, he was smiling and blinking like crazy. Steve had a tell.

Pop psychologists theorize that tells are unintended actions birthed in the subconscious. Most people are taught at an early age a number of rules that are meant to govern their actions throughout their lives. Parents, teachers, and the Bible preach to us that telling the truth is always better in the long run. That rigorous education settles into the subconscious and becomes the foundation for the character we display as we grow into adults. Tells are simply a result of conflict between the implanted notion of morality and our intention to deceive.

We give our little secrets away every day, even though we don't want to. Some say that only the guilty sleep well in jail. The theory goes that if a guilty man gets caught, he figures that he is where he belongs and might as well get some sleep. An innocent man tosses and turns, trying to think how to escape his undeserved peril.

We are riddled with these tics and twitches. They are everywhere and in everything we do. Those of us who have not been trained to deceive have a tendency to cover our mouths or avoid eye contact when telling lies. That's why I would never date an actress—while normal people are studying, say, the market economy of the original thirteen colonies, actors are learning how to look you dead in the eye and pass along an absolute fabrication.

Our innate desire to tell the truth is most counterproductive at the card table. Having a poker tell can be disastrous. When I was just learning the game, I bought



an instructional video called *Caro's Pro Poker Tells*. I didn't get around to watching it until years later, the night after I was knocked out of the 2000 World Series of Poker. Caro described a tell in which a player, thinking about whether to call a bet, suddenly asks the dealer or another player how much he can raise. Caro's point was that anybody playing in a reasonably high-stakes game knows how much he can bump a bet. Somebody who takes a lot of time and then asks that question must be trying to seem stupid or desperate. When I read that, I thought Caro had to be making it up: no one is that dumb.

The next day I went to watch the final table of the tournament I'd just been knocked out of. When I arrived, only three players were left, all great talents. At one point Melissa Hayden bet, and Men Nguyen, a three-time champion, just sat there looking confused. After a while he looked at his cards and then asked an official how much he could raise. The guy told him, and Nguyen raised. Hayden called, and Nguyen turned over a full house, laughing as he collected the pot. I guess Hayden figured that even the great players have tells.

Overcoming a tell is as difficult as changing any other habitual aspect of your personality. I knew a cardplayer who videotaped his regular card game every week for a year. He would watch the tapes for hours and make notes about his mannerisms and reactions to keep his body language from giving away anything about his hand. He found that even after playing the game for thirty years, he still had about ten noticeable tells.

I asked him if he thought that any of them were obvious enough for other players to notice. He said, "I don't know—you tell me. I smile when I have good cards and pout when I don't. Think somebody was gonna pick that one up eventually?" He had a point.

Anyone playing poker is trying to deceive his opponents. Deceit is essential to the game. Therefore most tells are a matter of common sense. In Texas Hold'em, a game popular at high-stakes tables, each player is dealt two cards down. Five community cards are dealt face up in the center of the table: the first three at once (the "flop"), then the fourth (the "turn"), and then the last (the "river"). There are betting opportunities between rounds. From those seven cards each player makes his best five-card hand. If somebody gets a great hand from the flop, what is he going to do? Common sense dictates that he'll act as if the flop missed him completely. And sure enough, a lot of players do just that: they pretend to have no interest in the hand. They look away, watch TV, talk to other players—anything but look at the cards on the table. Somebody who stares at the flop for a long time almost certainly can't use it. He is examining it as if hoping that he will suddenly notice something new.

Now I'm going to do something extremely stupid. For the benefit of my readers I am going to open up the book

of tells I have accumulated over almost twenty years and let the people I've played with know what their little tics are. My brother, for instance, is a sturdy player—so sturdy that he remains completely calm when he's bluffing, his hands as steady as a rock. But—and this took me a long time to figure out—when he has a sure winner and he's got a player trapped, he gets so excited that his hands shake.

Here are some other classic tells in my Tuesday-night game. Johnny California (this and all the names that follow are my invention), a man with the worst posture in the history of primates, sits up as straight as a board when he has good cards. Tom Lemme has a chip-related giveaway. When he stacks his chips neatly while putting them in the pot, he usually expects to be getting them back. When he throws them in aggressively, he's usually trying to bluff. And when he tosses them in sloppily, he's usually making a reluctant call.

The kind math professor who mentored me through my developmental years of poker, in graduate school, had a tell. I feel like a heel admitting this, but I never told him that I had picked up on it. I guess I should have, but we used to play together often, and keeping it to myself saved me a lot of money. The professor had a tendency to look at his chips when he got a good card, as if he wanted to make sure that his money was still there to bet with. If, for example, in a game of Texas Hold'em he had a pair of nines after the flop and the turn came up a nine, he'd stare at his chips and then look away into the distance. I knew what that meant. I folded a lot of high pairs after the turn was dealt when I saw him look at his chips like that. Sorry, Doc. A better man would have told you sooner.

He is a perfect example of why a player should never look at the flop as it's being dealt. Most people are so intent on what cards are about to come that they give something away by their reaction. Don't watch the cards being dealt. Watch the faces of the players who are watching the cards being dealt. You can check your hand later. See if anybody flinches or blinks or smiles or even looks away when the flop hits the table. Any of those reactions will tell you something about what's going on around you. This is why dealers flip all three flop cards at the same time—nobody can discern a player's reaction to an individual card.

I'm aware of two great tells in my Monday-night Hold'em game. Andrew Megget has a weird way of looking at his cards: he picks them up with only one card visible, puts them back down on the table, slides the bottom one over the top, and then looks again. He does this every time—well, almost every time. Occasionally Andrew takes a second look at the first card. I didn't figure out why for the better part of a year. When the first card is inconsequential, maybe a five, he quickly looks at the second. But if the second card is an ace, he has to check the first one to see if the suits match, because he didn't pay attention before. Almost every time he examines his cards a third time and

then calls the bet, he's playing an ace and a small card of the same suit.

The other great tell in that game belongs to Chris Wigmore. For a long time he was a very conservative player. But in the mid-1990s he took a job at an Internet company and made a fortune. Chris started playing loose after cashing in on his stock options. He now plays a very aggressive game. But even though his bank account allows him to be carefree at the table, his subconscious is stuck back in 1991, when he was a lowly ad exec, hoping not to lose so much in a game that he couldn't pay his rent. Whenever he makes a big bet in my direction, I just sit and wait. He probably thinks I'm calculating pot odds or something like that, but I'm waiting for him to get uncomfortable. When he has a great hand, Chris is dead serious. He waits me out without saying a word. When he's bluffing, he tries to act as if he's waiting me out, striking up nonchalant conversations with people at the table. That's when I call him.

Chris also has a funny tendency to separate his winnings from his buy-in. This doesn't make much difference in limit games, but otherwise it can be a huge disadvantage. A player who stacks his chips that way is obviously concerned about the game's outcome. He likes to know that he's ahead. So if Chris has, say, \$300 set aside from his \$2,000 buy-in when we're playing no limit, I know that unless he has a great hand, any raise over \$300 will usually knock him out, because he doesn't want to end with less money than he started with.

When I was in college, I used to play with a guy we called Stoner. He was, as his nickname implies, a heavy doper. Stoner was peppered with tells. He was smart enough to figure them out and make corrections, but he didn't really care enough to do so. If the flop was three cards of the same suit and Stoner didn't look at his down cards but did bet, I knew he had a flush. But if he looked at his down cards right away, I knew he was too high to remember what suits they were and had to check them before deciding what to do. If he called any bets after checking his cards, I knew that one of his cards matched the suit on the board, and therefore he needed the turn or the river to make a flush. He'd do the same thing in seven-card stud. If his first three up cards were of the same suit and he had to check his down cards, I knew he didn't have a flush yet.

Stoner was also one of those players who never bet an incomplete hand in five-card draw. If he was dealt a four-card flush or straight, he always checked or called and then drew one card. But if he bet or raised and then took one card, that meant he had two pair. Also, the way he looked at the drawn card was a giveaway. When he was drawing for a flush, he'd shuffle the drawn card into his other cards and then squeeze the hand out slowly.

He did the same thing in seven-card stud: when he was dealt the last card, if he shuffled it into the rest of his down

cards, he needed a good fifth card to complete his hand. If he just picked it up and looked at it, he'd had a made hand before the seventh card was dealt.

The last hand Stoner and I ever played together was a game of pot-limit five-card draw. He dealt me the ace and king of hearts, the three and eight of spades, and the nine of clubs. I had been losing all day, so I opened the betting with three dollars. Stoner called. I kept the ace and the king and drew three cards. He drew one. After dealing himself the card, he picked it up and looked at it. Miraculously, I drew a ten, a jack, and a queen, and ended up making an ace-high straight (known as "Broadway"); I bet the maximum. He raised me the amount of the pot. That was a scary raise: I would have been terrified that any other player had made a full house or a flush. But not Stoner. Because he had called my original bet and then taken one card, I knew he didn't have two pair, so a full house was out of the question. And he had picked up his one drawn card and looked at it without shuffling it into his hand. So I knew he had a straight. Since I had the highest straight possible, the worst I could do was split the pot with him, so I raised him the value of the pot. We each raised once more, and then he called and flipped over his king-high straight. He lost more than \$200 in one hand of a dollar-ante game. That's hard to do.

He actually accused me of cheating after that hand, because my last raise was suspicious in his eyes. He wanted to know why I hadn't thought he had a flush or a full house and just called him. Well, buddy, here's your answer.

That hand with Stoner provides a perfect example of the deductive reasoning necessary to becoming a winning poker player. No single observation helped me all that much, but when I put them together, the information became extremely useful.

Obviously, the longer you play against a player, the easier he is to read. If you make notes about your opponent's play over time, eventually you will be able to predict his or her actions. However, certain universal truths about human nature translate directly to the card table. Take any cliché about the human psyche and you will find something that applies to poker players.

Somebody much smarter than I am once said, "The vigor of youth gives birth to the misconceptions of immortality." That's a little flowery for my taste, but it aptly describes life at the poker table. Younger players have not become jaded by years of improbable defeats. They feel vital at a table. For the most part, the younger the player, the looser he is, the more likely he is to bluff. Older players tend to be wiser, more in control of their emotions, and to play a much more straight-up game.

What players do and say unrelated to poker often opens a window onto their psyches. Drunks bluff more. People who bet on sports or horse races while playing poker par-

ticipate in hands only when they have premium cards, because their attention is being diverted and they're not concentrating enough to bluff with any savvy. The same is true for people who eat at the table. People who dress up for a game in fedoras or fancy sunglasses often play a complicated game, bluffing or semi-bluffing and slow-playing (pretending to have bad cards by not betting) much more than the average player does.

A few nights after I got knocked out of the 2000 World Series, I played a medium-size game of pot-limit Texas Hold'em at the Bellagio, in Las Vegas. In one hand I found myself contending with a man who looked exactly like Uncle Fester, of the Addams Family. After many raises and reraises, the last of the common cards was dealt. I still had exactly what I had started with: a pair of jacks. Given what was on the table, no one could have a flush or a high straight, and the only card showing that was higher than my jacks was the last card dealt—a queen. Before the queen came up, I had ended each round of betting, meaning that I had either bet or raised and Fester had called me. But as soon as the queen showed, Fester bet the pot—about \$500 dollars. Now, I had never met this man before. I had no way of knowing if he was bluffing. I decided to try an old standby move: I pretended I was going to call his bet, motioning toward my chips while watching for his reaction. Most of the time a player will react to a called bet. If he slumps in his chair, he has nothing. If he jumps toward his cards to flip them over, he usually has a huge hand. Well, Fester just sat and watched me—but he also got steamed that I had tried such a sophomoric move on him. So he started to hassle me. "What the hell was that—you trying to steal the money, kid? What you gonna do with it, anyway? Buy some Rogaine?"

I had managed to annoy a total stranger, which I didn't feel good about. But then I considered his insult. I do have a receding hairline; that is an undeniable fact. But I still have a good deal of hair on my head. So what was he trying to say? If some guy with Fabio hair had leveled that volley at me, I would have thought he was trying to provoke me into calling with a losing hand, and therefore I'd fold. But this man was himself Telly Savalas bald. I'm not even sure he had eyebrows. Some guys can get away with that look, but it wasn't particularly flattering on him. So why was he talking to me about Rogaine? I saw it for the desperate ploy it was, and I called. Fester turned over a pair of tens, I turned over my jacks, and the dealer pushed the \$1,000 pot over to me.

My reading of Fester could have been completely wrong. He could have had queens or better, predicted my reasoning, and insulted me in hopes of getting me to call. That's why a lot of players have fake tells. They are, after all, trying to deceive you. But one thing is certain: the more attention you pay to the body language of your opponents, the less money you'll leave on the table when you walk away. ♠

PURSUIITS & RETREATS

TRAVEL

AT ANCHOR IN THE GALÁPAGOS

Cruising isn't the only way to see this unique archipelago

BY EDWARD J. LARSON

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Mention Ecuador's Galápagos Islands and what comes to almost anyone's mind is tortoises, finches, and nature cruises. Last year I published a cultural history of the archipelago, and whenever I gave readings from my book, some listeners would nod knowingly and then come up afterward to tell me about their own once-in-a-lifetime cruise through the islands. "But I never mentioned cruising," I was tempted to say. It's worse when I lecture at natural-history museums, because these often sponsor study cruises to the place, and I have to bite my tongue. Packaged Galápagos cruises are fine—a worthwhile part of a visit to the islands. But to settle in for a week or two on shore, and absorb the peculiar charms of the islands at your own pace, can be even finer.

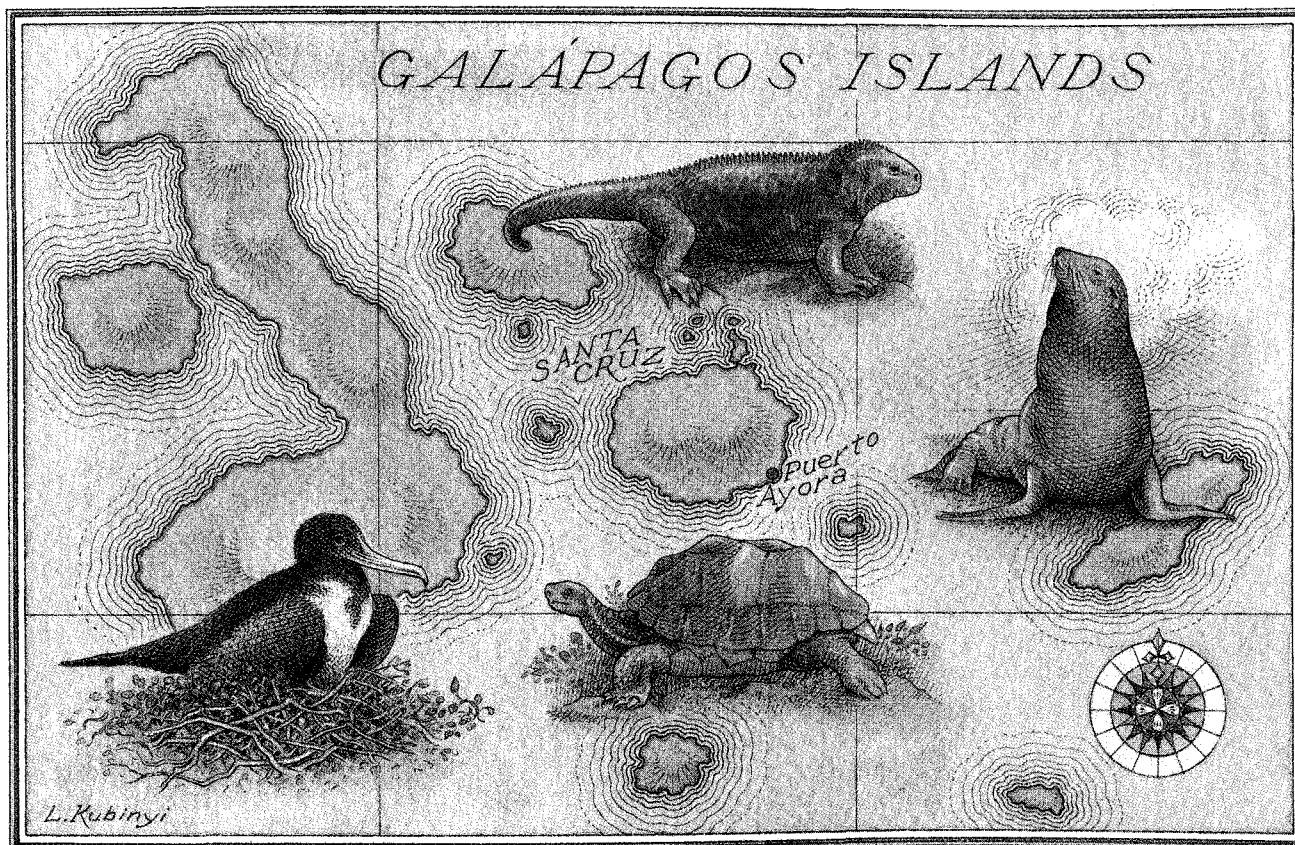
Oh, what charms they have. There are thirteen real islands here and a few dozen islets, scattered across a Denmark-sized stretch of the equatorial Pacific about two hours' flight time west of the Ecuadorian mainland. Everyone knows about the archipelago's approachable wildlife. Edward Hicks's *Peaceable Kingdom* jumps off the canvas and springs to life. Opportunities to swim with sea lions and walk among nesting blue-footed boobies are commonplace. For experiences like these, nature cruises of a week or longer do have the edge, because the ships have time to reach the outer islands and islets, which harbor the best surviving colonies of Galápagos penguins, flightless cormorants, waved albatrosses, and red-footed boobies. Nonetheless, on the easily accessible inner islands all but the most enthusiastic keepers of

lists will find more than enough wildlife to satisfy them: those sea lions and blue-footed boobies, and also lumbering giant tortoises, dragonlike land iguanas, and magnificent frigatebirds. Marine iguanas, Charles Darwin's "imps of darkness," are likely to be found lounging on your hotel's deck. And Darwin's fabled finches are ubiquitous: if you let them, they will steal rice from your plate at outdoor cafés. Even a small colony of penguins frequents the centrally located Isla Bartolomé.

When I suggest to conservation-minded Americans that it's perfectly all right to plop themselves down in the Galápagos for a week or two, they tend to react as if I'd suggested that they camp out in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, and take their favorite paintings down from the walls so as to study them more closely. But land-based Galápagos tourism need not be any more intrusive than the nature cruises. Approximately 97 percent of the islands' land mass falls within Galápagos National Park, where the same strict rules apply to all visitors; much of the remaining territory, including the two towns where most tourists stay, is already developed. No one is allowed to wander freely (much less camp) in ecologically sensitive areas. All national-park visitors are restricted to designated sites, where their numbers are limited, and they must be accompanied by a park naturalist or a registered guide. Even those biologists most concerned about deterioration of the Galápagos environment agree that existing regulations keep tourism from doing significant direct damage to the

ecosystem. On balance, tourism may well help, by increasing international concern for the islands and by giving Ecuador an economic reason to preserve them.

The ideal roost in the Galápagos is Puerto Ayora, a burgeoning resort town on the southern coast of Santa Cruz Island, smack in the middle of the archipelago. (The other major town is the archipelago's capital, Puerto Baquerizo Moreno, on San Cristóbal Island.) Puerto Ayora scarcely existed forty years ago, when UNESCO and a partner organization began to build the Charles Darwin Research Station there. Shops, restaurants, and hotels evolved to serve the visiting and resident scientists, most of whom have hailed, over the years, from Western Europe, the United States, or Australia. The town was and is strikingly cosmopolitan. English is widely spoken, and the U.S. dollar is Ecuador's official currency. Commercial nature cruises began in the late 1960s, the first two cruise operators being Lindblad Travel (now Lindblad Expeditions), of New York, and the Ecuadorian-owned Metropolitan Touring. Those two venerable agencies still operate cruise ships in Galápagos waters, and their ships are some of the biggest and most luxurious—although today they have lots of competitors. Then as now, passengers flew into what had been built as a U.S. military air base on Baltra Island, which rises like a bump off the north coast of Santa Cruz. In time settlers built a road across the larger island from Puerto Ayora up to a landing just across the narrow channel from Baltra. Ever since, the town has been expanding as the center for Galápagos tourism. These days more than 10,000 people, more than half the archipelago's residents, live here. Including cruise passengers, who often stop for guided tours of the research station and its tortoise-breeding facility, more than six times



that number visit the islands annually.

On a typical day Puerto Ayora's broad harbor is packed with private yachts, fishing boats, and commercial cruise ships. The presence of so many yachts contributes immensely to the town's charm. Situated 600-odd miles off the coast of Ecuador and only somewhat farther from the Panama Canal, the Galápagos are the last landfall in the Western Hemisphere for many sailors heading westward around the world. Apparently, sailing a yacht around the world has become popular of late, attracting otherwise conventional folks ranging from families with young children to retired couples on long-anticipated adventures. I met one businessman, two years into a planned six-year circumnavigation, who from aboard his sailboat stays in daily touch by Internet with the North Carolina beer distributorship he manages. Think of it: George Bailey could have run the Bailey Building and Loan, in Bedford Falls, and still taken his dream trip. It *is* a wonderful life. After these sailors leave the Galápagos, they face the longest stretch of open ocean of their voyage. Many linger in Puerto Ayora for weeks, screwing up their courage

and making sure everything on board is shipshape. It makes for fascinating conversations in the local restaurants and bars, and I readily struck up friendships with some members of this breed apart, which continued by e-mail long after I had returned home and they had sailed into the sunset.

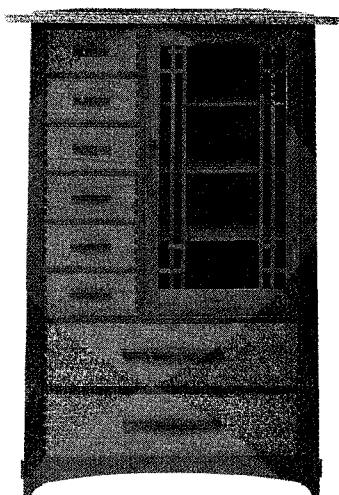
Other people here seem remarkably cordial as well. Residents freely suggest places to go and things to do on the islands, and visitors eagerly share their latest discoveries. Puerto Ayora retains a frontier feel. It has no franchise restaurants or chain hotels. Since everything is indigenous to the Galápagos, visitors must seek and share advice. The hotels in particular have a family-like intimacy.

About two dozen places to stay dot downtown Puerto Ayora. All are small by U.S. standards. At the bottom end sit a number of dirt-cheap but clean and friendly hostels hand-built of cinder blocks by the enterprising Ecuadorian families that own and operate them. A few of these have evolved into mid-range hotels complete with pools and restaurants that guests inevitably share with the owners' extended families. At the top end are three relaxed retreats

from the equatorial sun that provide pleasant rooms or cottages, good food, and entertainment in resortlike settings.

The oldest of these mini-resorts is Hotel Galápagos. It was founded in 1961 by an eccentric American sailor named Forrest Nelson, who made it this far but no farther on what was meant to be a voyage to the South Pacific and beyond. Over time his establishment (now run by his son, Jack) has evolved into an eclectic tree-shaded compound of bungalows and larger buildings, including a restaurant, a bar, and a scuba-diving operation, nestled on the bay between the center of Puerto Ayora and the scientific-research station. It is an ideal location for visitors torn between going into town and frequenting the station's superb natural-history exhibits. At Hotel Galápagos the rocky shoreline is littered with marine iguanas and seabirds. Hotel Delfín, located across the bay from town and reached by water taxi, is much more isolated but boasts a quiet sandy beach. Many repeat visitors swear by it.

It may simply reflect my West Coast tastes, but my favorite place to stay in the Galápagos is the cozy Red Mangrove Inn—a pastel-hued bed-and-breakfast



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lifted straight out of a California watercolor. Guests leave their shoes at the door, and usually manage to find their way to a waterfront Jacuzzi. Only minutes by foot from the center of Puerto Ayora, along the main road to the scientific research station, this inn boasts a panoramic harbor view. The bar and the restaurant overflow onto a mangrove-shaded patio. With only twelve rooms (most with views), the hotel is able to pay careful attention to all its guests. As at every other hotel in Puerto Ayora, the proprietors will gladly arrange day trips and activities. Here they also rent kayaks, sailboards, and mountain bikes, and offer overnight excursions to and horseback riding at their remote ranch, high in the island's interior.

That it puts you within easy reach of Santa Cruz's interior highlands is, in fact, among the reasons that staying in Puerto Ayora is a good idea. Cruise ships deliver tourists directly to most of the archipelago's best-known coastal attractions, but the interiors of some of the larger islands offer their own delights. Thanks to the hard-surface road that bisects Santa Cruz, it has the most accessible of the interiors. Though many cruises offer excursions here, few ship-based tourists ever venture beyond the rock or sand coastline of any island—and that's a shame. The landscape changes dramatically as you travel inland. First comes a broad, rising plain, where desertlike conditions prevail and the things that look most like trees are gigantic prickly-pear cacti. Then Santa Cruz and the three other largest islands (which, like all of the Galápagos, are really the tops of enormous volcanoes standing on the ocean floor) rise high enough, to more than 2,000 feet above sea level, to have central cloud forests as well. On Santa Cruz this is tortoise country, where thousands of the ancient beasts survive in their native habitat, some weighing as much as a quarter ton. Vermilion flycatchers, Galápagos hawks, and short-eared owls also live here. There are gaping volcanic craters and lava tubes. Riding and hiking trails cut across cattle ranches and through the wilderness. Day tours, complete with lunch or dinner in a mountain lodge, can be booked in town—often with the same local tour operators

who handle the cruise-ship excursions.

Still more appealing—at least to me—is scuba diving. I go a couple of times on each trip, and I'm a rank amateur at the sport. On various day trips out of Puerto Ayora, I have dived among sea turtles, marine iguanas, penguins, sea lions, eagle rays, moray eels, sharks, and rainbow assortments of tropical fish. The diving is so good in these waters that some scuba enthusiasts come for nothing else and live aboard dive boats. However, the various restrictions placed on Galápagos nature cruises tend to hinder them in offering scuba diving; cruise passengers interested in diving must usually plan to lay over in Puerto Ayora for a few days or else arrange for a commercial diving boat to come out and pick them up. The town has three busy scuba centers, but I was so impressed by my first dive, with Galápagos Sub-Aqua, that I never tried the others. Just ask for senior dive master Fernando Zambrano, and he'll take care of everything.

Of course, most tourists still go to the Galápagos to view seabirds, reptiles, and marine mammals. Nature cruises deliver these goods in grand style, by depositing their passengers at the designated coastal visitor sites around the archipelago. But some popular sites can also be reached on guided day trips—mostly by boat—from Puerto Ayora. On various day trips I have visited the Plaza Island sea lions, North Seymour's nesting boobies and frigatebirds, the Sullivan Bay lava flow, Santa Fé's enormous land iguanas, and the spectacular cinder cone of Isla Bartolomé, and in each case I found the experience similar to the one I had when I visited on a cruise.

There is more to do in and around Puerto Ayora—but what I've told you about already should keep you busy for a week or two. ▀

You cannot telephone the Galápagos with any reasonable expectation that the call will go through. The Internet, however, has made it possible to communicate with local concerns. All the hotels I mentioned have Web pages and e-mail addresses. With some luck you can reach Hotel Galápagos at jack@hotelgalapagos.com (double-room rates there start at about \$122 a day), Hotel Delfín through www.ecuadorable.com (\$127.50 a day), and the Red Mangrove Inn at www.redmangrove.com (\$120 a day). Try www.galapagos-sub-aqua.com to arrange scuba diving. Both Lonely Planet and Rough Guide publish reliable guidebooks for Ecuador that contain extensive information on Galápagos travel.

FIVE LAKES GRILL

Restaurants worth building a trip around

BY CORBY KUMMER

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Detroit diners seem to find their own farm-raised meats and vegetables too dull for eating out. The most lauded local restaurant of the moment, Tribute, features wasabi tobiko and winter truffles on its menu, and has a Japanese chef. In Ann Arbor, Detroit's intellectual neighbor, the notion of fine dining retains a whiff of the decadent, and the favored meeting places are coffeehouses.

Diners in both cities who want a taste of the Midwest drive about forty-five minutes to the postcard-ready town of Milford, whose still-active Main Street has non-chain stores in brick and white-clapboard buildings. Behind the large picture windows of a double storefront that once housed a furniture store are the Prairie-style fittings of Five Lakes Grill, whose chef, Brian Polcyn, celebrates the ingredients of the region in which he grew up.

From the tile mosaic of the state of Michigan on the entryway floor and the big seventies-style Pop canvases in the dining room of harvest landscapes with cows and sheaves of wheat, you can guess that there will be an emphasis on the local. The lines of the large restaurant are clean; the only ornamentation comes in the form of Frank Lloyd Wright-influenced lamps and teak-colored wood columns.

The food has clean lines too. Polcyn knows how to get true flavors. His forte is meat, appropriately enough in the Midwest. The pork and the duck were the best I've had in years—anywhere, even in southwestern France, where every house is a farm and every farm fattens a few ducks. Specifically, Polcyn's forte is charcuterie, the art of sausage-making. Every day a different pâté or terrine is offered, and the peppery duck pâté I tasted was a tour de force. Each component—the firm little chunks of duck leg, the pistachios, a soft pink-and-red forcemeat of pork and

duck—had distinct texture and flavor; the aftertaste was clear and pleasant, with none of the muddy residue most pâtés leave.

I wasn't surprised to learn that Polcyn teaches charcuterie at the nearby Schoolcraft College, in Livonia, where he himself trained. Michigan is something of a breeding ground for culinary virtuosos: only seventy Americans have passed the ten-day Certified Master Chef exam; eight of them live in Michigan, and four of them teach at Schoolcraft. Polcyn has twice taken the exam and twice failed. (His second attempt was described in *The Soul of a Chef*, by Michael Ruhlman.) His zeal seems misguided, given the weeks of preparation and lost sleep the exam involves, and given that he has amply proved his talent as a cook—something quite different from technical bravura.

Polcyn is at his best with local provender. Pan-roasted breast of Indiana duckling with a port currant sauce could hardly have had better flavor, and even a trendy-sounding garlic-sage duck strudel beside the lightly gamy sliced meat was simple and good. The duckling is always on the menu, along with potato-crust Lake Superior whitefish, the fish to eat in these parts. (In truth, lake whitefish is more appealing as an idea than as a reality, because of its sometimes mushy texture, although it does have a hearty, arctic char-like flavor.) Another local ingredient that always appears is pork, and Polcyn's grilled pork loin, served with wild mushrooms and pan juices sweetened with caramelized onions, was as unexpectedly lush as the duck. Both sauces had the shine of lacquer and the impressive depth of flavor that comes only after multi-step cooking over several days. Even better, both meats, with their full marbling of fat, tasted the way they used to, before Long Island duck-

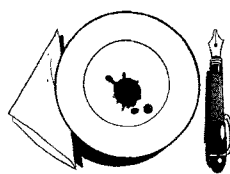
lings were raised in quarters closer than a Manhattan apartment and Iowa hogs were bred to be slim.

It's easy and also a good idea to steer clear of the dishes featuring Polcyn's I-keep-up-with-national-trends ingredients, such as white truffle oil and pomegranate molasses, both of which are in fact already *démodé* on the coasts. And perhaps inspired to nitpicking by reading about that murderous exam (framed articles document Polcyn's dogged determination), I couldn't help noticing that the wild-rice cakes served with the duck were made with bland, cultivated "wild" rice. This was a disappointment, given that hand-harvested, truly wild rice is gathered in the lakes of northern Minnesota (which, after California, is the country's chief grower of cultivated wild rice) and Wisconsin.

The greater, and similarly easy to remedy, disappointment was the condition of the cheeses. Polcyn wisely obtains them from Zingerman's, in Ann Arbor, which is probably the country's best source of artisan cheeses (the bread, too, comes from there). The selection that night included several Spanish cheeses that Zingerman's was featuring as part of a month-long promotion, including a crumbly, tangy sheep's-milk cheese called Zamorano to which I had developed a strong attachment when I tried it during an all-too-brief visit to the store. But the restaurant had kept the cheese too long and neglected to trim it, so it had lost its fresh, lively flavor and appearance.

None of this really mattered, given the quality of the ingredients—especially that pork, whose equal I don't expect to find in a long while—and the pleasure of finding such a nice restaurant in such a nice town. It did give me an idea, though: establishing a merit-badge system for qualification as a Certified Master Chef, and limiting the already demonstrably skilled Polcyn's requirements to cheese storage and wild-rice identification. ■

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GARDENS
PLANT ZOOS

What exactly is a botanical garden for?

BY HATSY SHIELDS

.....

If I lived nearer a botanical garden, I'd probably while away whole days of my life walking among its indigenous floral treasures and leafy aliens, or buried in its library, or gleaning what I could of the institution's latest scientific investigation. England's Royal Botanic Gardens, in Kew, west of London, would be my dream neighbor. Even its mouse-quiet herbarium, crammed with towers of shallow drawers containing scrupulously splayed desiccated plant parts,

is an exhilarating place, considering how many millions of specimens it holds from every corner of the globe.

In Kew's misty working greenhouses visitors may bump into a scientist like Brian Mathew, the gentle, lanky bulb expert who is responsible for introducing to the horticultural trade the adorable *Fritillaria michailovskyi*—a tiny alpine with inch-long burgundy bells banded in mustard yellow. In the mid-1960s Mathew escorted it from a

mountain pass in Turkey (he won't say exactly where) to Kew, and then on to Dutch propagation fields. Years later the fritillaria's progeny began appearing in bulb catalogues, and today a delicate few bloom sweetly, if hesitantly, in my own garden's haphazard borders.

In reality the botanical garden closest to me is forty-five miles from my house. The New England Wild Flower Society, a century-old institution, champions native plants in its Garden in the Woods, in Framingham, Massachusetts, west of Boston. Despite the distance, I regularly visit the society's fine, focused botanical collection, consisting of more than 1,600 species. I go in the spring to wander woodland paths speckled with showy trilliums, amid marshes alive with colonies of pitcher plants and rare orchids; later in the summer to walk on the meadows waving with tall spires of magenta blazingstars and heavy-headed purple coneflowers; and in the fall, the circus time of color, to marvel at the clethra's glowing gold foliage and the native viburnum's clusters of translucent apricot-colored berries.

NEWFS has a 55,000-plant commercial nursery, from which I've brought home pots of rare buttery-yellow Kentucky lady's slippers and frothy five-foot plumes of cream-colored goatsbeard. And it offers courses on everything from the life cycles of New England seaweeds to early-morning birding to garden photography. For weeks one fall I navigated highways at night to attend mushroom-identification classes, a brown paper bag full of musty specimens on my front seat alongside pages of spore-dusted notes. As I write this, the society is pouring cement for a fire-proof vault, an indestructible seed bank to safeguard the genetic heritage of plants threatened in the wild.

When the government of Wales opened a multimillion-dollar national botanical garden, in the Tywi Valley, in 2000, with new buildings—including a sparkling space-age glasshouse—designed by the renowned modernist architect Sir Norman Foster and set in a historic park, I began planning my

JOHN A. LYNCH



*The Garden in the Woods,
in Framingham, Massachusetts*

trip. The first botanical garden of this scale to be created in the United Kingdom in some 200 years, the National Botanic Garden of Wales declared itself “a blueprint for an environmentally sustainable garden for the new millennium” and “a centerpiece of Welsh culture”—lofty claims by the feisty folk of a country not much bigger than Massachusetts, but then, they are famous for vigorous flag-waving.

I visited the National Botanic Garden in the rolling, unbelievably green hills of southwest Wales on the garden’s sunny first birthday, this past May. Busloads of French teenagers, Welsh-speaking toddlers, and garden-club ladies, some with spouses (“Puffin, luv, I’ll just pop off then for a look at the hostas”), were already fanning out across the 568-acre property when I took my bearings outside the round wooden gatehouse, also designed by Foster. On a welcoming terrace encircled by bright-green baby metasequoias, I read from the orientation kiosk that every year 150 million people worldwide visit botanical gardens, gardens that collectively hold more than four million living accessions, representing a third of all known plant species. The NBCW intends to support scientific research, conservation, and public education, its mission being to prevent further degradation of the world’s natural environment.

Oh, dear—the pumped-up language of a feasibility study. As I learned more about the garden’s *raison d’être*, my heart sank further. It took seven years for a steering committee to articulate a vision in order to submit an application for funding to Britain’s Millennium Commission, which dispenses money from the national lottery. A grant equivalent to \$35 million was bestowed in 1996. In an undeniably admirable auxiliary fundraising campaign the garden then matched every penny—and the project was under way.

At the outset the hope had been to rescue this once exquisite eighteenth-century landscape, whose design was commissioned by Sir William Paxton, a wealthy Scotsman who fell in love with Wales. He bought an estate that was then called Middleton Hall, and set

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The Great Glasshouse, at the National Botanic Garden of Wales

about reconfiguring it in 1789. Paxton's manor house burned to the ground in 1931. But as the NBGW project took shape, those shepherding it remained determined to save the Georgian outbuildings, the double-walled (for reflected heat) fruit and vegetable gardens, and a necklace of artificial lakes, all property of the local county council. William Wilkins, a well-connected local artist educated at the Royal College of Art and the founder of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust, rallied a patriotic team to lobby for the restoration. When I visited him in his ancestral home nearby, which overlooks the ruins of a 600-year-old castle, Wilkins told me, "It was a unique opportunity to fuse the creative tensions of the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries. It could be a dialogue on aesthetics between the original Arcadian vision and one of the future." Wilkins paced the length of his stone verandah, hands jammed deep in his pockets. I didn't know what to say, because it was far from clear to me that any such rarefied dialogue was taking place.

In committee, apparently, the objective ballooned from historic restoration to the construction of a national institution. The county of Carmarthenshire, where the National Botanic Garden is sited, west of Cardiff, is rural, struggling to survive on sheep and cattle farming

and desperately in need of an economic boost—like much else in Wales. A shiny new botanical garden would surely attract tourists, eager scientists, international business ... lights, action.

So there I was, ambling up the "Broadwalk," a path flanked on one side by jagged piles of rocks—an earnest display of the country's underpinnings (Precambrian granite, Ordovician dolerite, Lower carboniferous limestone)—and on the other by a 700-foot-long perennial bed. Any year-old border tends to be spotty. "A bit twee, do you think? Even rather suburban?" I overheard one Englishwoman say. (A cultured English accent asserts itself distinctly in this unassuming countryside.) Beyond the clumps of flowers the repaired outer wall of a double-walled garden stood sturdily; the vegetable garden itself is waiting for funds to be rebuilt. Ahead to the east rises the Great Glasshouse, 300 feet long, a twinkling egg emerging from an emerald hilltop. It almost doesn't matter what's inside, the futuristic form is so intriguing from afar.

When I reached the glasshouse, Ivor Stokes, the garden's wiry, genial director of horticulture, joined me, to show me around its varied landscapes. These—a rocky ridge, a splashing waterfall, a parched plain, among other things—re-create far-flung parts of the globe

that have in common a Mediterranean-like climate. "We want accurate representation of the plants within their natural communities," Stokes said, sweeping an arm toward the scorched, sandy pathways, his sagging, cream-colored linen safari jacket, brick-red shirt, and battered straw hat bringing to mind a coffee-plantation owner. The plants in the glasshouse are arranged geographically. We traveled from a field of eye-smarting-orange California poppies to a Canary Islands-style stony hillside covered in blue and pink echiums—lovely two-foot spikes of closely massed flowers—and then crossed a bridge into a grove of 200-year-old olive trees from Spain.

All this was surely ambitious, but throughout the glasshouse I never felt quite sure if I was meant to be in western Australia, Chile, or the south of France. And many of the plants looked as if they were putting on their best faces under trying conditions. They must miss the sun (it rains more than six feet a year in this part of Wales), and, too, they are still settling in after long journeys.

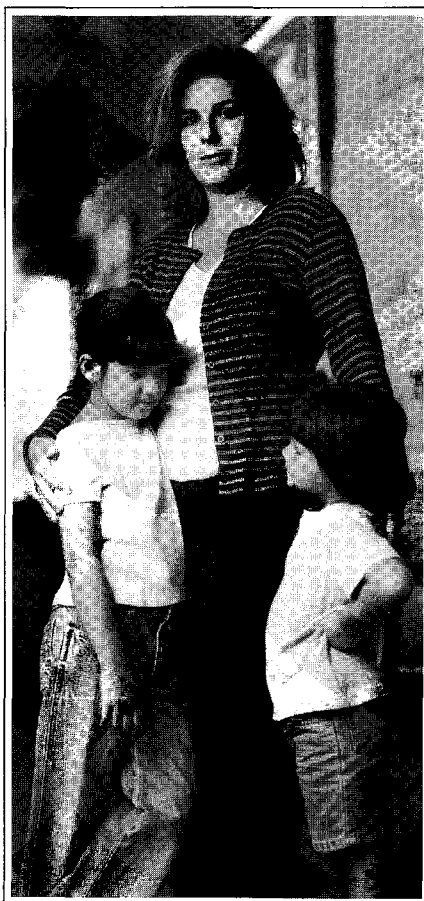
As Stokes explained it, the reason for gathering these particular species, many of them more determined-looking than beautiful, is that their natural habitats are fast being overrun by development. As the NBGW's mission statement explains it, the glasshouse is intended to be "a lifeboat to preserve unique species and plant genetic diversity for future generations." This *ex situ* conservation reminded me of rounding up white leopards and three-toed marsupials for a zoo: the effort is well intentioned, supposedly for the creatures' own good, and brazenly manipulative. It's no wonder that a King Protea from South Africa seems a little homesick under a crystal dome in western Wales.

Even the Prince of Wales himself, the royal patron of the garden, whom I met on this trip, struck me as less than overwhelmed by the goings-on there. Hopeful though his official message is in *The National Botanic Garden of Wales* (2000), a book that chronicles the garden's conception and purpose, in person Prince Charles was regally blunt. We shook hands (I'd been duly instructed in how to behave in a submissive colo-



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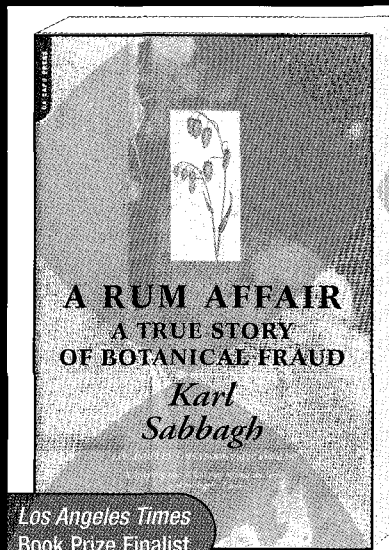


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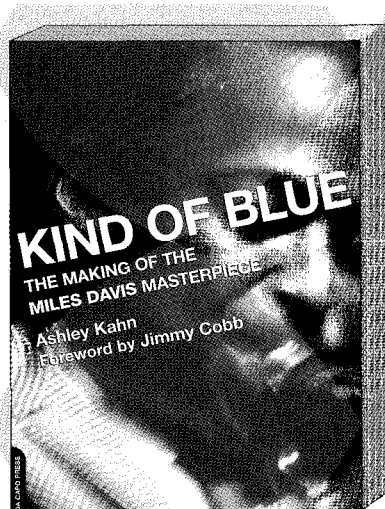
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nial manner) in St. David's Hall, in Cardiff, at a reception after a concert hosted by the Welsh College of Music and Drama. Enthralled by his exquisitely tailored suit, and longing for a whiff of palace-endorsed soap (face to face the Prince is utterly engaging), I managed to blurt out that I'd enjoyed visiting Sir Norman Foster's glasshouse. He replied, "Awfully hot, isn't it?"

It's not easy being a fledgling botanical garden in the twenty-first century—especially one without crazed and deep-pocketed plant collectors at its core. Unquenchable appetites dictated the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plant acquisitions at throbbing green places like Kew; and the Jardin du Roi, in Versailles; and the Arnold Arboretum, in Boston. Ships were dispatched, and explorers like Captains Bligh and Cook sailed off to retrieve pineapples, breadfruit, rubber plants, freckle-faced charreusse orchids, and cut-leaf Japanese maples. I like to imagine a besotted Sir Joseph Banks, an early naturalist at Kew, when he first laid eyes on clouds of flaming bottlebrush, bushes cloaked in fuzzy red or pink spikes.

Around the globe today botanical gardens must be earth-friendly and democratic and must decry plant piracy. As a result of recent international treaties, it's illegal to dig up and cart off your heart's desires from, say, the Himalayan foothills or the tropical forests of Borneo. "A generalized concern for the environment now pervades Western culture," as Andrew Slater, the editor of *The National Botanic Garden of Wales*, puts it in the book. "So, our new botanic garden has to contribute to conservation."

As I dutifully toured the NBCW's themed display gardens, indoors and out, and forced myself to read seventy-five educational signs, I found myself hankering for evidence of a hot-blooded plant glutton. Although it is too young to be judged harshly, the NBCW appears more consumed by its visitor tally (242,000 the first year!) than by a love of plants. There is talk of building a hotel; scientific laboratories are under way; and a multimedia auditorium has been completed. The NBCW dispenses easily digestible, ecologically correct messages

(don't waste water; avoid chemicals, limit planting monocultures like lawns, go organic)—worthy blah, blah, blah in short green bites. Lowering his luxurious black eyebrows, Ivor Stokes told me, "People want a nice day out."

The three days I spent at the garden were nice days out for me. I wrote postcards on the lawn of the handsome stable courtyard as I listened (without understanding a word) to a lively Welsh grandmother entertain a two-year-old. On my last day I returned in the evening for a concert of Handel, Mozart, and Vivaldi, performed by the National Chamber Orchestra of Wales in the Great Glasshouse before an audience of forty. In folding chairs beneath a dry slope of rosemary and white-flowering cistus we watched the Tywi Valley mist rise; a thousand transparent panes of glass turned a pearly lavender-opal as the light faded. The soloist, an Indian violinist, was splendid in purple silk, and later, when I walked down the hill to the parking lot, the dome glowed in the night like an otherworldly spaceship. It was lovely—but it had nothing to do with plants.

Back home, I pored over the New England Wild Flower Society's journal of programs and events for the coming winter: thirty-eight pages of symposia, lectures, botany studies, field trips, and workshops. How to decide among "Carnivorous Plants to Know and Grow," "Never Say It's Just a Dandelion," and a hike with a naturalist through the society's garden under the Blue Moon, followed by hot cocoa? For a twenty-hour course on the flora of New England, the blurb warns, a background in taxonomy is necessary, as is a willingness to study independently. The botanist teaching "Conservation Biology" writes, "Participants will be required to read ... and come prepared to speak up and to listen."

Meanwhile, the manager of the society's nursery, Bill Cullina, is hovering over a sea of covered cold frames, each seedling responsibly propagated on site to ensure that the wilderness is left intact. I'll be there in the spring for a pot of hepatica, minuscule star-like deep-blue flowers above green kidney-shaped leaves. I don't know how I've managed to garden this long without one. 

READY FOR ACTION

Despite seeing on television news what used to be confined to action movies, audiences have been flocking to them, perhaps eager for the illusion of control they offer

BY FRANCIS DAVIS

.....

Film Culture was the name of an arcane critical journal, but those two words always make me think of the goo from candy and spilled soda that accumulates on the floors of movie theaters, and then of the habits of those of us who spend so much of our lives in theaters that others must think us indigenous to them—candidates for ethnological study. One of our most cherished customs is seeing movies in the early afternoon or very late at night, when the rest of the world is working or getting ready for bed.

The first time I saw Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), on a weekday afternoon soon after it opened, about a third of the audience seemed to be young black males—an unfamiliar presence in art houses like the one closest to me in Philadelphia. If these kids had been lured by the promise of reckless bloodshed, they weren't disappointed. "Damn," one of them cried out in seeming approval on several occasions when a round of bullets hit a human target. (Sometimes it was a drawn-out "Dey-em," other times a quick "Dang!") Although I was used to this sort of thing, from having seen so many action movies with integrated audiences in multiplexes, where expressions of astonishment by teenagers are pretty routine (and often prompted by lavish on-screen displays of money, drugs, or stolen goods, rather than by carnage), others in the audience apparently were not. Several people turned to see where the noise was coming from—at first alarmed, then amused, and finally just annoyed. The only ones who paid no mind were the young men who made up about another third of the audience, whose intense concentration suggested that they might be film students weighing the logic of Tarantino's edits or keeping a running count of his allusions to Hong Kong action

movies. They looked as if nothing short of gunplay in the aisles would break their trance.

I remember wondering if these two groups of young men were seeing two different movies—and which of those movies I was seeing. Possibly a third. A scene from *Reservoir Dogs* that many people recall with a shudder (actually,



Steve Buscemi in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992)

a scene they only *think* they remember, because the camera moves away a horrible second after the squeamish in the audience have closed their eyes) is one in which a hoodlum slices a cop's ear off with a razor and then douses him with gasoline. The dialogue that people tend to remember from the movie involves the crayon aliases—"Mr. Brown," "Mr. Orange," and so on—that the leader of a gang of criminals assigns to the total strangers he has brought together for a heist. These aliases are a way of keeping anybody from ratting on anybody else.

The wonderful Steve Buscemi—a bug-eyed, motor-mouthed actor who slightly resembles Don Knotts and plays many of his parts like Deputy Sheriff Barney Fife with a coke habit and a rap sheet—objects to being called "Mr. Pink," because he thinks it makes him sound gay.

The bit of dialogue from *Reservoir Dogs* that made a lasting impression on me is from a scene that finds Harvey Keitel dragging Tim Roth, who is noisily bleeding to death, into the gang's warehouse hideout. "Come on," Keitel says. "Who's a tough guy?" Unaware that Roth is an undercover cop, Keitel is making one last attempt to bond with him, man to man. But his

tone is that of a father giving a pep talk to a little boy who has fallen off a bike and skinned his knee. It's as if what he most wants is to get Roth to stop his caterwauling. Roth gives the right answer. "I'm a tough guy," he yowls through his pain, and there you have it—the real subject matter of *Reservoir Dogs* and practically every other movie ever made about low-life bruisers. They're okay with breaking any law except the unwritten one about keeping your mouth shut, which includes not letting on when you're hurt.

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Self-consciousness of this kind can be detrimental to a movie. Yet Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) was a masterpiece largely because of its self-consciousness. It was the definitive 1940s film noir, even though it was made three decades later and depended on a final twist that would have been taboo in the days of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe. And sometimes, as with Tarantino's articulation of the most basic and knuckleheaded of male codes, a line or two of movie dialogue will be so knowing and full of sass—so clearly meant as a comment on the movie and others in the genre—that I find myself glancing around the theater to see if anybody else caught it.

We expect witty flourishes from Tarantino, who is extremely literary, even if his idea of literature is some people's idea of trash, and whose characters talk and talk and talk—whether it's John Travolta, in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), going on about what the French call a Quarter Pounder with cheese, or Samuel L. Jackson, in *Jackie Brown* (1997), delivering an impromptu lecture on the relative merits of various automatic weapons. What's surprising is to find ourselves laughing along with the script in an action blockbuster of the kind made for an international market, where the assumption is that any dialogue not essential to the plot will be lost in translation—and is probably over the heads of most audiences anyway.

The veteran action director James Cameron, despite the step up in class that *Titanic* (1997) was supposed to represent for him, might be the last man in Hollywood from whom one would expect much in the way of wordplay. But there's plenty of it in Cameron's *True Lies* (1994), with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jamie Lee Curtis, which is as enjoyable for its banter as for its special effects.

True Lies, for which Cameron also wrote the story (based on the screenplay of an obscure French movie called *La Totale!*), stars Schwarzenegger as a harried secret agent simultaneously trying to spice up his marriage and crush the Crimson Jihad, a foreign terrorist group in possession of weapons of mass destruction. What struck some as shameful

about the movie eight years ago, and might seem especially irresponsible now, if it weren't so cheeky, is that the threat of a nuclear holocaust is a McCuffin—a device to keep the characters running from place to place in what is really a bedroom farce. Toward the end, as Schwarzenegger kisses Curtis and slips her wedding ring back on, as if to renew their vows, the sky lights up with a nuclear explosion over the Florida Keys, in a wicked parody of those Freudian fireworks displays that used to stand in for sex in the movies.

True Lies is like *American Beauty* played for broader laughs and interrupted every so often by a shootout or a helicopter chase. The underlying comic premise is that the brute strength and animal cunning we've seen Schwarzenegger rely on to thwart evildoers in movie after movie are of no practical value to his character in everyday life. His wife and teenage daughter, who believe he's a computer sales rep, think him an awful drudge, a buff Willy Loman. "Whenever I can't sleep, I just ask him to tell me about his day," the wife complains to a friend. When the terrorists kidnap Schwarzenegger, they also bag Curtis. The terrorists inject Schwarzenegger with a truth serum, and, taking advantage of the situation despite her fear, Curtis asks him a few questions of her own. After establishing that he is a spy, she asks if he has ever killed anyone. "Yah," he says, "but they were all bad."

Schwarzenegger isn't telling Curtis anything we don't already know from having watched him mow down terrorists for close to two hours without hitting a single innocent bystander. Not until later does it sink in that this wry rationale for his bloodletting, and for the bloodletting in action movies in general, has been used throughout history to justify capital punishment, vigilantism, and even genocide. And it brings a shudder to realize that the terrorists who carried out the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center probably felt justified in doing so because they believed their victims to be infidels.

Even before September 11 those of us who enjoy action and disaster movies

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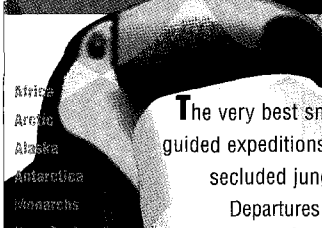
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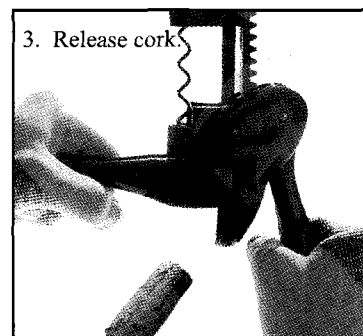
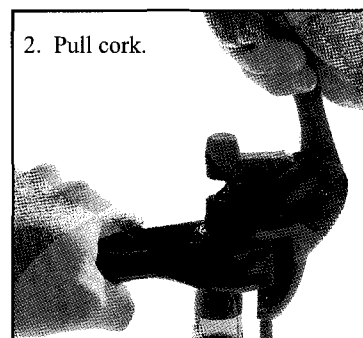
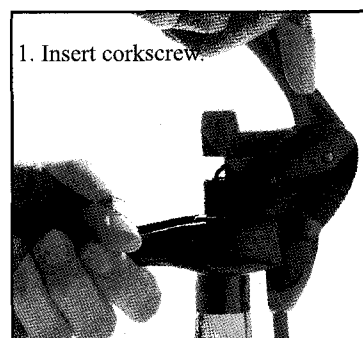
that are done with flair were sometimes hard put to defend them. Many people find such movies objectionable not because they portray violence but because they glorify it, cheapening regard for human life—particularly among adolescents, who may not recognize that some forms of behavior are acceptable only in the movies. (This is a genuine concern. Two years ago I went to see Denzel Washington in *The Hurricane* at a theater where there had recently been gang violence; it was a school holiday, and everyone in line was frisked for weapons and made to pass through a metal detector.) My feelings about even the best of these movies—another exceptional one is John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997)—tend to be so conflicted that I'm usually forced to begin my defense of them by conceding that I have what I suppose is a gift for intellectualizing movie violence along with the fine points of a director's *mise en scène*. Now I would argue that our response as a nation to the events of September 11 suggests that even the youngest and most impressionable of moviegoers can tell the difference between depictions of slaughter and the real thing.

In the weeks following the attacks and preceding the first air strikes on Afghanistan, the Hollywood studios treated action films like something shameful and best kept out of sight. The opening dates for several fall movies were pushed back, some for a few weeks and others indefinitely—decisions I suspect had more to do with fear that these movies would suffer at the box office than with genuine sensitivity to what audiences might be feeling. The producers of *Collateral Damage*, starring Schwarzenegger as a firefighter whose wife and child are murdered by Colombian terrorists, closed down their Web site and ordered the return of posters for the movie, which had been on display in theater lobbies all summer.

Topical humor was also put on hold. Yet people hungry for political humor continued to log on to *The Onion*, and video-store chains reported no decrease in sales or rentals of movies like *Armageddon* and *Independence Day*. One Blockbuster manager told the *Los Angeles Times* last September that

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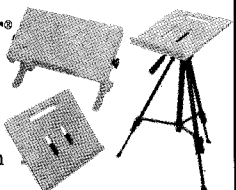
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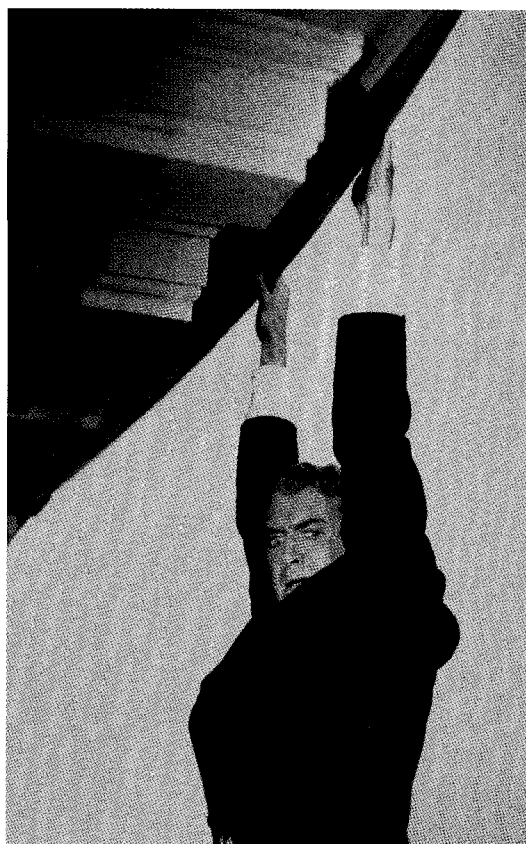


people wanted “anything where terrorists got the stuffing kicked out of them.” Our popular culture is our collective dream life, and it has never been easy to predict what direction it might take, especially in times of national crisis. Along with escapist fare like *Going My Way* and battlefield epics that might as well have been written by the Office of War Information, the movies made during World War II included many in which Humphrey Bogart and John Garfield gained stardom as existential anti-heroes—wise-cracking loners not about to sit still for sanctimonious speeches or to put their shoulders to the wheel without asking questions first. It’s possible that bitter memories of the attacks and the anxiety that followed will cause audiences to avoid the likes of

Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. But it’s just as possible that audiences will be ready for action—that in the face of uncertainty they’ll flock to movies that offer them the illusion of control.

Last year I saw John Singleton’s remake of *Shaft* with a mostly middle-aged, working-class black audience that seemed to love the idea that the hero was willing to turn in his badge and play dirty if that was what it took to remove a vicious drug dealer and murderer from the streets. Despite their cheers when *Shaft* finally took out his nemesis, these people didn’t strike me as likely to resort to similar measures to make their own neighborhoods safe. The movie was their way of letting off steam—escapist fantasy with an element of social consciousness. I have a feeling that action movies are going to fill the same need.

What’s missing from even the best of the action movies becomes obvious when they are compared with an Alfred Hitchcock masterpiece that I and many others consider to be the



James Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958)

greatest of American movies: *Vertigo* (1958), a story of unconsummated love that ends with one lover dead and the other broken, in which Hitchcock gave suspense a moral dimension. More forcefully than in his earlier and much lighter *Rear Window* (1954), in *Vertigo* we encounter the themes of helplessness, guilt, obsession, and absence that have dominated so many of the finest movies of the past ten or fifteen years, including Brian De Palma’s *Casualties of War* (1989), Michael Tolkin’s *The Rapture* (1991), Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game* (1992), Atom Egoyan’s *Exotica* (1994), Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Boogie Nights* (1997), Billy Bob Thornton’s *All the Pretty Horses* (2000), and Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2001). As different as they are from one another, these movies have in common a character who is either powerless to stop tragedy from befalling another person or powerless to halt his own slide. The murder of someone innocent—the young Vietnamese woman raped by American soldiers in *Casualties of War*, for example, or the kidnapped British soldier played by Forest Whitaker in *The Crying Game*—

can be disturbing evidence of a movie's integrity. The problem with most action movies is that nobody worth caring about is ever truly put at risk in them; when the villains kidnap the hero's wife or child or partner, we know he'll come storming to the rescue. And even if he doesn't (as in *Face/Off*, which begins with John Travolta's young son taking a bullet meant for him), his manly tears and the revenge he vows give us an even greater interest in rooting for him.

I enjoy many of these movies for the acting as much as anything else. Schwarzenegger, for example, has a fine comic touch, especially now that he has as many crow's feet as muscles and doesn't make a secret of it. Yet the people who are most appreciative of good acting—people who read reviews and pride themselves on confining their moviegoing to the art house—tend to shun figures like Schwarzenegger. He doesn't need those people, but the directors of daring little independent films do, and the violence in their films, or something that might be troubling or unsavory about the characters, frequently keeps the art-house audience away. More than an understandable aversion to violence seems to be involved—namely, snobbery. Even though cineplexes keep getting bigger and bigger, their screening rooms keep getting smaller and smaller, reflecting not just profit motives but a growing distrust among different kinds of moviegoers that has as much to do with race and class and age as with taste.

Ten years ago *Reservoir Dogs* became a surprise hit by appealing simultaneously to two very different cults: sensation-seekers and budding cinéastes. Last year the reviews for Mike Hodges's *Croupier* were so consistently favorable that people who claim to be forever on the lookout for good movies could hardly ignore it. This year *Memento* attracted a large number of young people, even though (to judge from the audience I saw it with, and from what I heard being said about it for months afterward) they seemed more impressed by the protagonist's tattoos and the movie's gimmick of a narrative in reverse than by the mood of sorrow and the

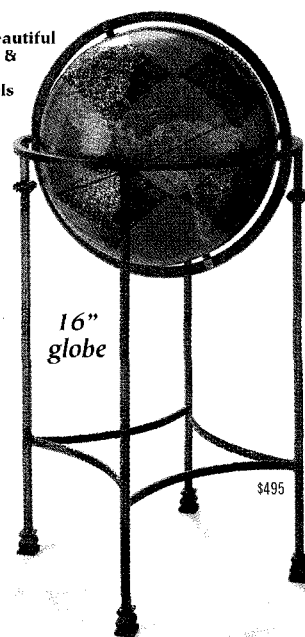
drumming panic that I thought were the best things about it. It almost seems like a miracle these days when a good little movie finds the large audience it deserves, because so many of these movies feature shady or unpleasant characters, and so many of those who might enjoy them seem reluctant to see a movie about people they wouldn't vote into their co-ops.

Though one rarely hears "*Damn*" shouted in pleasure in art houses, the audiences in them have their own methods of acting out. At a comedy there are always a few who clap their hands loudly several times as they laugh and then sigh, letting the rest of us know that not only did they get the joke but they also recognize the Importance of Laughter. When this audience does embrace a crime movie, it's usually the wrong one—Jonathan Glazer's *Sexy Beast*, for example, with a cardboard performance by Ben Kingsley as a thug feared by other thugs, rather than Andrew Dominik's horrifyingly funny *Chopper*, with a lively and complex performance by Eric Bana as Mark "Chopper" Read, Australia's most famous career criminal and one of its best-selling violent eruptions frequently surprise even him.

If not values, maybe what we get from movies is something equally essential to determining who we are, though more ambiguous and harder to pin down—something often referred to as sensibility. As a child, I went to the movies so regularly that my bewildered mother would say that I'd do so even if she were dying. She didn't know how prophetic she was. Despite the stroke she had suffered three months earlier, my mother's death seemed terrifyingly sudden. I saw *15 Minutes*, a dreadful movie starring Robert De Niro (who now seems to make no other kind), after visiting my mother in the hospital one night last spring and trusting that she was in no immediate danger. Approximately forty-eight hours later she underwent emergency brain surgery as the result of a fall she had taken before she went into the hospital. She never regained consciousness.

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A hospital nurse had told me that it was good in neurosurgical intensive-care units to leave the television turned on in an unconscious patient's room, preferably to a channel on which the patient might recognize some of the voices. I suggested American Movie Classics for my mother, hoping that the voices of actors familiar from her youth would be reassuring to her. She lay there unconscious with the television on for three days, her head bandaged and her face gruesomely bruised from the fall and the blood thinner she'd been taking, her neck and shoulders tensed like those of someone stunned by a blow to the head and instinctively bracing for another. She looked like the victim of an unspeakable act of violence—but who was there to blame? My mother's hands were like ice, but for two days I had been able to warm them by squeezing them in mine. On the last morning my hands were as cold as hers when I reluctantly unclasped them.

Though raised Catholic, I have never been religious; I often joke that as a child I preferred the movies to church because the movies were air-conditioned and started in the afternoon. But I knew that my mother would have wanted a Catholic funeral. After the priest read the verses from John in which Jesus raises Lazarus, I delivered the eulogy. Trying to reconcile my mother's beliefs with my own, I spoke of memory as a form of afterlife. I also talked about how she and I had often watched old movies on television together when I was a kid. Her favorites were Bette Davis and Joan Crawford; I was drawn to Bogart and Garfield, in their roles as tough guys with big hearts who were so used to keeping their lips sealed that their way of saying good-bye, perhaps forever, to someone they loved might be to say "I'll be thinking of you."

At that point there was a collective sob from the other mourners. My wife, who had lost her mother just six weeks earlier, was still weeping when it was time for us to follow the casket up the aisle. "Come on," I whispered, holding her tight, though maybe I was the one more in need of hearing it. "Who's a tough guy?" ▀

THE LAST SQUASH TENNIS PLAYER

A chance discovery leads the author to the champion-for-life of a forgotten sport

BY JAMES ZUC

.....

One evening in the summer of 2000 my girlfriend and I went down to New York's financial district to see a play. This was unusual, because there are no active theaters far south in Manhattan. We arrived at the address, 21 South William Street, and found ourselves at the threshold of a long-defunct men's club. Inside the Tudor-style seven-story building was the performance space for the U.S. premiere of *The Designated Mourner*, a play by Wallace Shawn that had opened in London in 1996. We walked past a hodgepodge of club debris—heavy dishes stacked on a bar that receded into darkness, stuffed moose heads gazing dully from a reading-room floor—and climbed rickety stairs to the fifth floor. The first half of the play was acted out in a room dominated by an old bed. The audience of thirty sat in moth-eaten velvet armchairs covered by blankets.

For the second act a production assistant led us two floors up to an old squash court. A couch, for the actors, sat in the center of the court, facing thirty folding chairs in two rows along the front wall. Even on the heels of the first act this was an extraordinary atmosphere. The stiff-white-box feeling perfectly matched the vacant ennui and fear that pervaded the play. I had heard that Harold Pinter's debut one-act play, *The Room* (1957), was first performed in a squash court, so the tableau had a theatrical precedent.

Afterward, as the rest of the audience returned to the fifth floor for wine and cheese and a chat with the actors, my girlfriend and I stayed behind and stared at the court. It was strangely unlike other antediluvian courts. The side walls did not exhibit the telltale smear of ball marks. The court looked too narrow. We paced out the length and width of the court: about thirty-two feet by seventeen. A faint line on the floor marked the middle of the court, but it ran all the way

to the chairs at the front wall. No one had ever hit squash balls in here, I realized. This was not a squash court; it was something that I thought no longer existed: a squash tennis court.

Squash tennis was invented, more or less accidentally, in 1883 at St. Paul's School, in New Hampshire. James P. Conover, the St. Paul's master who also introduced ice hockey to the United States, had ordered rackets and balls from England for his new racquets courts (racquets is an older, faster, deadlier version of squash). The cus-

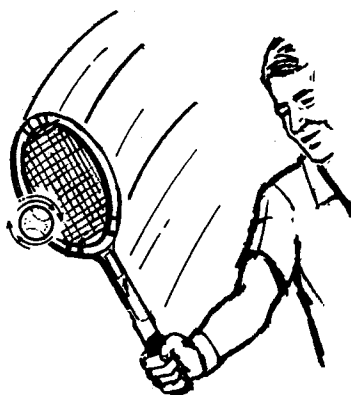


Fig. 3 Racquet open when contacting ball.

at their estates. Players loved the healthy workout, the simplicity of the court, and the chess-like shotmaking strategies. Stephen J. Feron, the squash tennis professional at the Harvard Club in New York, was the game's leader. Aficionados considered his style, full of spinning angled shots and feathery drop shots, the epitome of beauty.

In 1913 Feron ruined the game he had perfected. He contracted with Spalding to develop a new squash tennis ball—smaller and more pressurized, and much livelier. Old-timers felt that Feron's new red-hot ball blasted away the cerebral aspects of the game, and neophytes found classic squash tennis shots like the three-wall fadeaway and the four-wall boast too complicated to untangle at Mach 9 speeds. Within two decades squash tennis had contracted into a peculiar Gotham pastime, found only at the university clubs in Manhat-

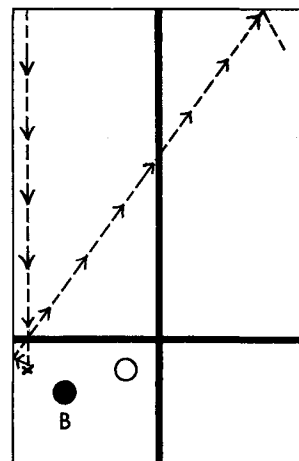


Fig. 4 To retrieve wall hugger, hit ball right into wall.

tomhouse in New York detained the funky-looking equipment, so the boys, anxious to play, carried tennis rackets and tennis balls onto the courts. The schoolboy game they made up, incorporating aspects of both squash and tennis, spread, and before World War I squash tennis was the game of choice for the country's elite in winter. At a time when squash barely had a foothold in America, the National Squash Tennis Association boasted more than fifty member clubs across the country. William C. Whitney, George Jay Gould, and John D. Rockefeller Jr. all had courts

tan. After World War II the decline of squash tennis was precipitous. Spalding stopped making balls for the game. There was a brief revival in the 1960s but it didn't take, in part because explosive growth in the popularity of squash and the new game of racquetball sucked away possible players. A Cuban exile in New York named Pedro Bacallao was the national champion and president of the NSTA in the 1970s, but in 1979 he moved to Miami and the game slowly disappeared.

But not entirely. Every year on the Sunday closest to New Year's Day the

sports pages of *The New York Times* list the national champions of the closing year. Year after year, after “squash racquets” and before “steeplechase” comes “squash tennis” and the name Gary Squires. After seeing the Lower Manhattan court, I decided to give Squires a call.

I found him at Apawamis, the country club in Rye, New York, where he works as an assistant tennis and paddle-tennis pro, and he invited me up to play squash tennis. When I arrived, at noon on an autumn weekday, he was in the pro shop stringing a racket. He shook my hand, took me to a squash court, and gave me a junior tennis racket, twenty-six inches long; we started hitting a yellow tennis ball back and forth. Squires, who is forty-four, has a military posture. When he talked, between rallies, he stood still—no twirling of his racket or shifting of his feet. He looked like a country-club tennis pro—the deep tan; the strong, lean legs; the white teeth; the expression molded by countless hours of reassuring socialites that their backhands were improving. After a few hits Squires stopped and talked for a bit. “I’ve never played on a true squash tennis court,” he told me. “I guess that’s sort of strange, considering I’m the national champion, that I’ve won the title a dozen times, but when I started picking up the game, in the early 1980s, there weren’t any real courts left. I’ve never played a tournament on a true court.”

Recently there has been a nationwide trend to convert American, 18.5-foot-wide “hardball” squash courts to the international, “softball” width of twenty-one feet. “Yes, you could play squash tennis on a hardball court,” Squires told me. “They were close enough—just a foot and a half difference in width. But the softball court is too large: twenty-one feet—no way. So that’s one of our problems with squash tennis today. We haven’t had any squash tennis courts for decades, and now what we have been using for years as a substitute—American squash courts—are disappearing. Someday there just won’t be any sort of court where you can play squash tennis.” I asked him

when he had last played. “It’s been a couple of years,” he said.

Squash tennis, I soon learned, was hard. I am proficient at a number of winter racket games, and yet I was playing like a dog on ice skates, my legs and arms flailing in all directions. At first I couldn’t sustain a rally. My squash instincts, hard-wired after twenty years of play, failed me. My swing was grossly late. I was afraid of hitting the ball into the middle of the court—a squash no-no, but routine in squash tennis. Often I lumbered toward a back corner, chasing down a whizzing ball, when I should have been dashing up the court to take it after it thundered off the back wall.

We stopped after a couple of comedic points. I commented on my lack of anticipation. “That is why squash tennis, once you learn how to play, is such a good sport,” Squires said with a rare smile. “It is all turning, coming around, letting a ball go past you on your backhand and you take it on your forehand. There is a beautiful rhythm in a match—two men, neither moving too much, just waiting for the ball to come back off the back wall. That’s why the older guys loved playing. Experience counted, and it wasn’t a brutal physical drain, like squash.”

Squires spun his racket for the serve and won. I quickly fell behind, and the first game ended 15–4. Squires kept score meticulously. Often he seemed to prolong a point, but barely, just to make me hustle, and every so often he unleashed a sudden blast for a winner. During the second game the points flowed nicely. Three or four times I got hold of an easy ball and crushed it with a satisfying *thwop*, like someone beating a rug, but each time, my rocket rebounded high off the back wall and was a simple putaway. It was a warm day, and I got a good sweat going. The scores of the next two games were 15–6 and 15–11.

As we left the court, I asked Squires why the sport had died. “Me,” he said without hesitation. “I just dropped the ball. I stopped organizing the nationals. I went through a rough divorce about three, four years ago, banged me up pretty good, and at the same time, I

lost my job as tennis pro at Greenwich Country Club. Squash tennis got lost in the wash. I was the only guy really interested in carrying on the game. I had to make the phone calls to get guys to come to the nationals, and I didn’t. I’m probably not the right guy anyway. I’m not a good salesman. I’m not outgoing. I don’t cultivate a network of contacts.”

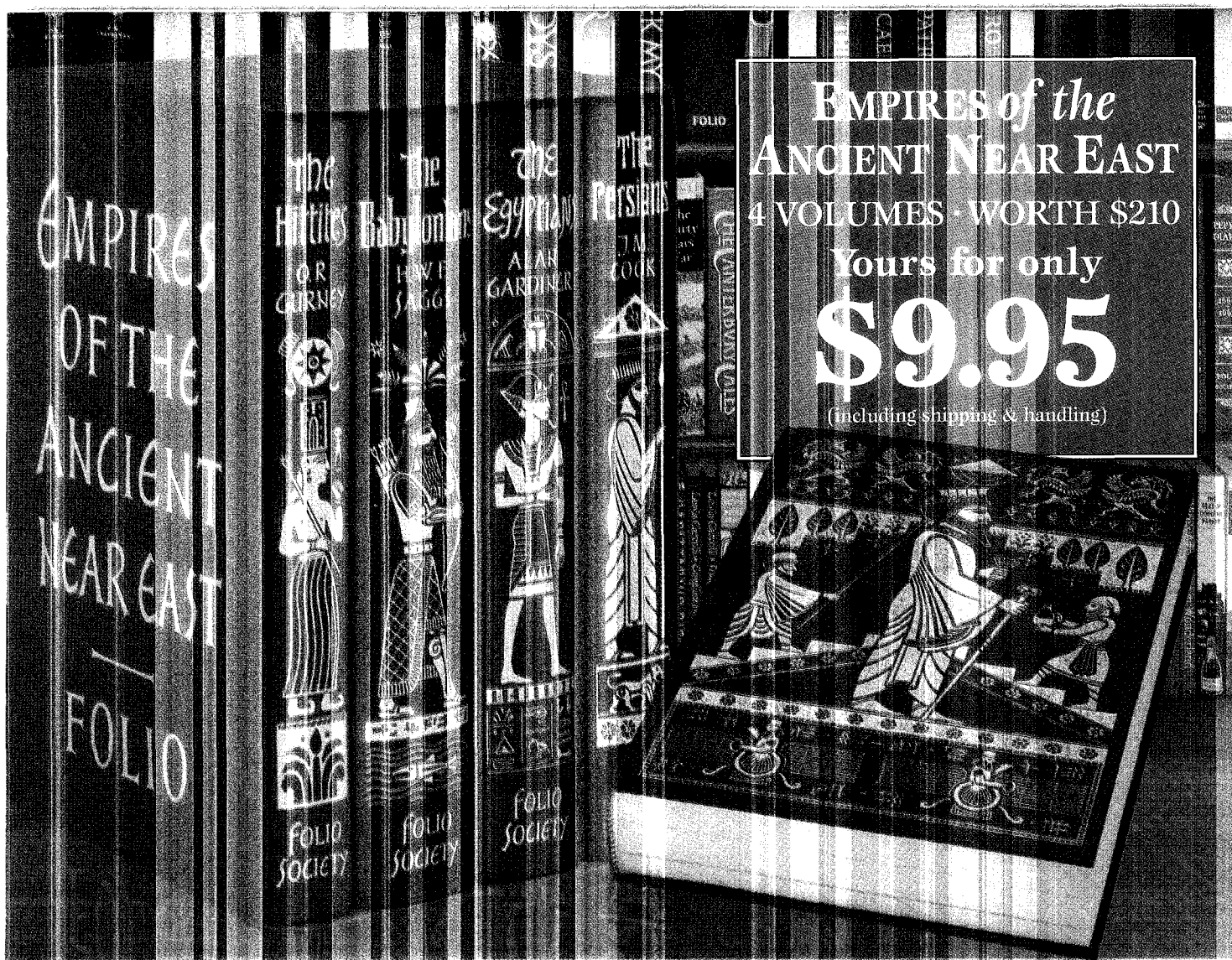
Squires and I drove to his house, around the corner from the club. He took me to the kitchen and brought out a picture frame and two large leather albums stuffed with yellowed newspaper clippings. “I got these about twenty years ago, just when I started playing,” he said, carefully placing the albums on his breakfast table. “They start in 1916 and run through the 1940s. They are a sort of history in a bottle, all the stories in two books. Pretty neat. And here is the draw of the first nationals I played in—1982. I won it. It was the first tournament I ever played in. I got it framed.” The sixteen-man draw showed that Squires had won his four matches with the loss of just two games. He was a natural. On the side of the draw was written, in pencil,

There will be a meeting of the National Squash Tennis Association on Saturday, April 3rd at 5 pm in the second floor lounge of the Yale Club. Please make every effort to attend. We must vote on the proposed rules change to permit hitting the ball into the back wall at anytime.

Drinks will be served.

We went outside to my car, and I asked Squires about the *New York Times* list. There hasn’t been a nationals tournament since 1995, so why is he listed each year as the top player? “The guy from the *Times* calls me every December,” Squires said. “He asks for the champion. I tell him that we haven’t held the nationals that year. He says he will stop listing squash tennis as a category if we don’t give him a champion, so I just put myself in. I don’t want the sport to officially die. It’s like I am a condor, an endangered species.”

By the time I pulled away, Squires was bare-handedly pruning the rosebushes flanking his front gate. I couldn’t help wondering if he and I had just played the last squash tennis match. ▀



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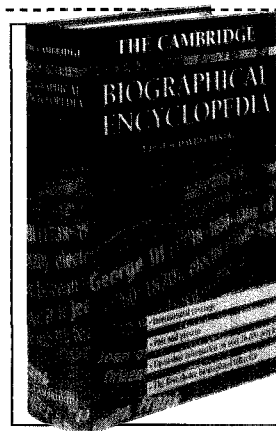
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INCOMPARABLE NATURALISM

*Only an artificer of the highest skill could have produced
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BY PHILIP HENSHER

.....

Even the greatest of writers can boast a distinguished posthumous detractor: Shakespeare had Tolstoy and Shaw, and Jane Austen had Charlotte Brontë. The statements these detractors made are so important and interesting that in the end they actually contribute to the sense of their subjects' worth and complexity. Indeed, one might ask whether a writer can ever be regarded as of the first rank if he or she has never attracted intelligent, passionate rejection. Regarding minor talents we don't trouble to disagree, and no one has ever thought it worth being extensively rude about Surtees, whereas Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, and Marcel Proust stand at the summit of literary achievement partly because we are never finished arguing about them.

But Chekhov has never attracted anything but admiration. As far as I know, no one has ever tried to mount a general case against him. Since his death very few practitioners of the art have regarded him as anything but the supreme artist of the short story. It is true that Hemingway, in a combative mood, once pretended not to care for him; but even Hemingway was obliged to exempt half a dozen stories from condemnation. Chekhov's influence has been enormous, and always benevolent; even those writers closest to him in manner, such as Katherine Mansfield and V. S. Pritchett, strike us not as imitators but as writers who found in his characteristic manner ways in which they

could discover their own characteristic manners. Writers find their own classics; but sooner or later everyone must reckon with Chekhov.

The reason for this supremacy among writers is often said to be Chekhov's

incomparable naturalism.

Put in a naive way, the usual claim is that Chekhov was not really a writer, with all the artifice and manipulation that implies, but someone who simply set down "life." His stories, like life,

have no beginnings, middles, or ends; they do not deal in crises and happy endings; they are simply glimpses of ordinary lives in their untidiness and irresolution. (How radical an approach that remains may be attested by any writer, even now: like many serious writers of short stories, I've experienced having a story turned down on the grounds that it had "no beginning, middle, or end." I wish I'd had the wit to say, "Few episodes in life do, apart from this telephone call.")

It's certainly true that Chekhov always wanted to give the impression that life continued outside the boundaries of his narrative, and many of his stories end by telling us that his characters' lives go on beyond the last page. "The day after this meeting I left Yalta and how Shamokhin's story ended I do not know" ("Ariadne"). The child Sonya sits, at the end of "An Anonymous Story," looking at the narrator "as if she knew that her fate was being decided," but what that fate is, the story does not explore. "There

is no more to be said about him" dismisses the eponymous hero of "Doctor Startsev," but his life goes on. Many stories end with unanswered questions—"What kind of life would it be?" ("The Steppe")—or with the initiation of some new action. Many, like "Terror" and "A Marriageable Girl," end with a departure for some new place, or, like "The Russian Master," with the promise to run away. Almost all of them contain, like the beautiful last paragraph of "A Lady With a Dog," the contemplation of "a wonderful new life." At the simplest level a remarkable number of Chekhov's stories end with a change in the weather: "It began to drizzle" ("The Duel"); "All night long rain drummed on the windows" ("Gooseberries"); "The sun began to rise" ("Lights"); the extravagant and, for once, rather overdone transformation of the seascape at the end of "Gusev."

All these endings, focusing on a new beginning rather than concluding something, emphasize what many people have most admired in Chekhov: a sense that life has been glimpsed here, and not glimpsed fully. At its grandest and most mysterious that conviction homes in on the famous unexplained noise that interrupts and concludes the action of *The Cherry Orchard*—a great string breaking in the distance. Plenty of productions have tried to turn that into a symbol, but it is rather more than that: it is a convulsive acknowledgment that there are things in the world, and in these lives, that neither the artist nor the audience can understand. But to describe Chekhov as purely a chronicler of life, as naive critics have done, is quite wrong. Rather, these expressions of incompleteness are supremely effective artistic conventions, designed to give the powerful illusion of real life. The inconclusive ending may be thought of as something that springs from Chekhov's observations of life; on the other hand,

Translations of Anton
Chekhov by Ronald Hingley
Oxford University Press

**READING CHEKHOV:
A CRITICAL JOURNEY**

by Janet Malcolm

Random House,
210 pages, \$23.95



just as plausibly, one could say that Chekhov was imitating one of the most effective devices of his great master, Pushkin. Many of Chekhov's endings are variations on the beautiful and startling conclusion of Pushkin's *Tales of the Late Belkin*: "My readers will excuse me from the unnecessary chore of relating the denouement." (It's always worth remembering what a huge international reputation Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* acquired—in the unlikelyst places—in the decades after the initial craze for it in England.) Chekhov's characteristic untidiness is, surely, drawn directly from the very deliberate narrative shape of *Eugene Onegin*. The illusion of reality in Chekhov is dazzlingly effective; only an artificer of the highest skill could have produced so seamless an illusion. And, viewed coldly, Chekhov's plots can be as sensational and melodramatic as anything to be found in Dostoyevsky. The fantastic farrago of the immense dramatic torso which posthumous editors have titled *Platonov* is customarily written off as an early aberration, but a distinct taste for the extreme persisted to the end of Chekhov's life. Men, women, and infants are brutally murdered; coincidences abound; passionate declarations and terrible confessions come thick and fast. We don't normally think of Chekhov as a gothic writer, but we shouldn't neglect the ghost in "The Black Monk" or the frightful escalations of "Murder" and "In the Hollow." The extraordinary sadistic sequence of "Ward Number Six," with the brutal payoff of the doctor's being confined to the asylum, is one from which even O. Henry might have shrunk; and it is one of Chekhov's very best things.

The standard reading of Chekhov's career is that having started as a writer of comic sketches, he turned away from those brilliant but artificial jokes toward a much looser, more naturalistic style. This is basically accurate, of course, but it neglects a fundamental continuity. What is apparent from those sketches is his genius for formal variation; a story may be no more than entries in the complaints book of a provincial railway station; it may, like "The Death of a Civil Servant," that brilliant imitation of

Gogol, conclude with startling inappropriateness. A story may be about nothing very much, as children play cards inconclusively and ineptly, or a huntsman and his wife meet by chance in the woods; a dramatic explosion may erupt without warning, or a furiously exciting crescendo may be manufactured out of nothing more than increasing numbers of people standing and staring up into the sky. It is a mistake to think that he abandoned that keen awareness of literary form in favor of the shapeless sequences of life. The slow escalation of "A Dreary Story," the profoundly moving and unconventional last section of "Murder," are the work of a supreme manipulator of form; and Chekhov perfected his craft in the zany puppet dramas of his first stories.

The idea that Chekhov's stories trace the disorganized, untidy shape of real-life events is a powerful one, but to see how false it is, one might look at the structure of "Doctor Startsev." Startsev is a young physician in a provincial town. He is taken up by a rather vulgar but charming family, the Turkins, who give "artistic" soirees. Their daughter, Catherine, who dreams of going to Moscow to study the piano, attracts his attention, and he proposes to her. She refuses, saying that she wants to devote herself to her art. Some years pass, and Startsev attends another soiree. Catherine tries to get him to propose again, but he has grown cold and bored with her. The story ends with Startsev, fat, unfeeling, and rich, and Catherine, older and suffering from poor health, living their sad separate lives.

In one sense this is a beautifully naturalistic performance with an unremarkably unhappy ending, but in another it could hardly be more formal. The structure is as artificial as a Bach fugue; the first soiree at the Turkins' is recapitulated in every detail, but the recapitulation is in a minor key. The only difference—it is one of Chekhov's grandest coups—is that what once delighted Startsev now bores and irritates him. The illusion of life is, as ever, overpowering—and immensely skillful. In reality Chekhov's art is as calculated as Swinburne's. So where does that illusion come from? Why do we feel that here we are being

shown "real life" in a way we are not in, say, the first book of *The Idiot*? "In the Hollow," perhaps Chekhov's greatest story, has much of the same quality of steadily mounting fury, but at no point do we have the sense, which Dostoyevsky was at some pains to instill, of being caught in the workings of a gigantic, relentless machine. "Doctor Startsev," once examined, is as mechanical a morality tale in its awesomely literal recapitulations as Tolstoy's "How Much Land Does a Man Need?" But always one feels the illusion of real life, and never the organizing hand of the creative imagination. In part this is owing to Chekhov's addiction to unfinished actions; even "In the Hollow," which has as shatteringly final a narrative as can be imagined, ends with a fade-out, as Lipa and Praskovya go on crossing themselves, over and over. And in part it is down to Chekhov's refusal ever to intrude himself with a judgmental adverb. I reflected, when I read Janet Malcolm's description in *Reading Chekhov* of "an almost satirically long empty corridor" in a hotel, that that was an indulgence Chekhov would never have permitted himself. Chekhov's judgments were sure and final and terrible; but he did not make them with adverbs.

Overwhelmingly, that sense of life arises from the astonishing, unelaborated concreteness of Chekhov's evocations of the world. He was the son of a grocer, and in a sense one could say that he never lost the attention a grocer pays to trivial domestic objects. Chekhov's world is, supremely, a world of things. To list those things is an instructive exercise. From the first four paragraphs of "In the Hollow": belfry, chimney, factory, road, railway station, unpressed caviar, jar, mud, fences, willows, waste, acetic acid, cotton, calico, tannery, cattle, stone-built house, church, vodka, skins, grain, pigs, peasant bonnet, timber. (A deliberately random stretch of prose). The properties of objects are always specified: always "Ukrainian" rugs, for instance. The objects of actions are always delineated; if people eat or drink, we are always told what they are eating or drinking. (There is a slightly odd limit to Chekhov's specificity: we are hardly ever told about financial facts—something

that Jane Austen never neglected—for a reason I don't pretend to be able to explain.) Many, perhaps most, novelists direct their attention toward the facts of the world only when those facts reflect some psychological truth. This is not so with Chekhov; it is not particularly necessary that when Olga takes a walk in "The Party," we are told she walks through "a thicket of wild pears, wood-sorrel, young oaks and hops." The landscapes are hardly ever illustrative backdrops to an emotional crisis; food and clothes—two things Chekhov was evidently fascinated by—may demonstrate a character's social status, but no more than that. It is impossible to imagine Chekhov's using a dress to prove a moral point in the way Proust used the Duchesse de Guermantes's red ball gown in "The Guermantes Way."

That throughout Chekhov the physical details are lavish and specific is one of the reasons that many of his readers have come to prefer the stories to the plays, where this aspect of his genius could not be fully expressed. These details very rarely attain the status of descriptions, however. More characteristically they are simply lists of objects: "pickled sturgeon, button mushrooms, Malaga wine and plain honey cakes which left a tang of cypress in the mouth" ("The Princess"); "fringes, ribbons, braid, knitting material, buttons" ("Three Years"). Each object appears unnecessary and even surprising in so frugal a writer; cumulatively, though, they create not just a world of unprecedented solidity but the sensation of human lives lived in that world. And every so often we do get a glimpse of what Chekhov surely felt—a sort of ecstasy induced by the simplest objects and self-effacingly ascribed to his characters: "The timid novices, the stillness, the low ceilings, the smell of cypress-wood, the modest fare, the cheap curtains on the windows—these things all touched her, moved her, disposing her to contemplation and good thoughts" ("The Princess").

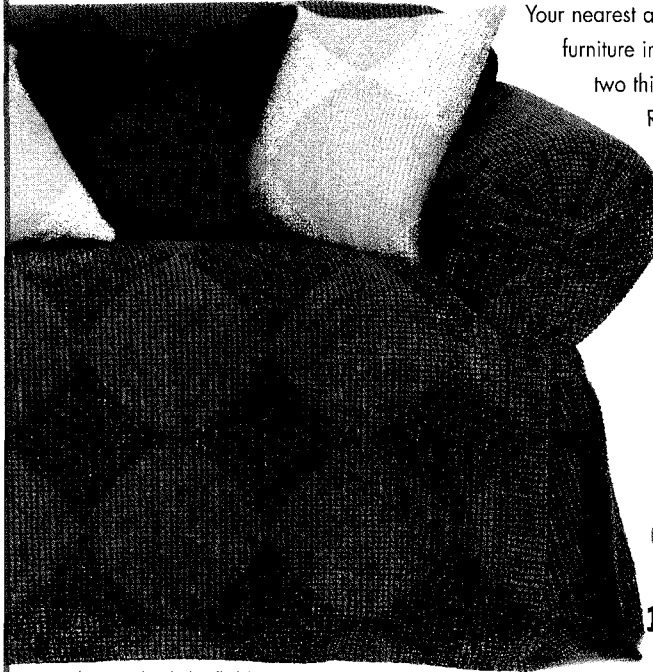
I said the appearance of life was an illusion, but perhaps it would be truer to say that Chekhov's manner reflects a conviction that there is nothing for the writer to talk about but the physical world and people's lives within it; the means by which the conviction is

conveyed are not naive ones, and are clearly identifiable by analysis. But the effectiveness and subtlety of Chekhov's conventions do not mean that his supreme artifice is, in any sense, a conjuring trick, or meretricious.

Many writers have attempted to capture Chekhov, but very few have succeeded. If the list of his imitators is long, fascinating, and rewarding, the secondary literature proper is not an inviting prospect. It is not quite as depressing as, say, Pushkin criticism (my idea of hell would be confinement in a library containing nothing but the Pushkin secondary literature), but still, hardly any of his many biographers have succeeded in conveying our inexhaustible fascination with him. Janet Malcolm's *Reading Chekhov* is a great improvement on the usual standard, and has the merit of being imbued with Malcolm's loving engagement with her subject on every page. The route she has taken is an honest one, but one that seems peculiarly inappropriate as an approach to Chekhov. It is largely an account of a journey through the former Soviet Union, a pilgrimage to the Chekhovian holy places, and is filled with the small irritations of such a journey: the needling and officious guides one knows so well; the loss of luggage; the sullen, greasy hotels. The memoir is a predominant literary form of our time, and perhaps inescapable, but one very remote from Chekhov's aesthetic. Chekhov described himself as suffering from "autobiographophobia," and when he resorted to the form of a first-person narrative, in "An Anonymous Story" and "A Dreary Story," the narrator was pointedly unsympathetic, remote from the interests and values of both author and reader. Of all authors, Chekhov is the one least easy to imagine trying to charm the reader in propria persona.

Nevertheless, if Malcolm's book is not Chekhovian in tone or manner, that is not a requirement in a biography—one wouldn't want a biography of Milton to be in blank verse, after all. Her project, one slowly realizes, is to travel to Chekhov's territory in the hope of coming across some plausibly Chekhovian stories and lives. Applied to most writ-

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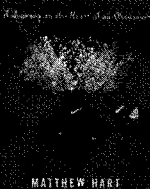
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ers, that would be a terrible idea: it would be a foolhardy biographer of Proust who wangled invitations to the luncheon parties of modern French duchesses. But Chekhov's subjects are mundane, and it is not obviously embarrassing for an investigator like Malcolm to explore ordinary Russian lives, to try to set out the wishes and disappointments of her guides and acquaintances in the course of her Russian journey. Well, no one expects her to fall in love and conduct an affair with an aimless waster encountered at a shabby spa, but there are plenty of lives in our own world as disappointed and blocked as anything in Chekhov; Chekhov's great subject is the most ordinary thing in the world. In the end, it must be said, Malcolm doesn't produce anything as rich as the slightest of Chekhov's stories on these subjects, but who, truly, could have?

Other aspects of Malcolm's study can only be put down to an incompatibility of cultures. Malcolm is an intensely metropolitan figure, of course, and her journey from her milieu to the ramshackle provinces of the former Soviet Union is, to a striking degree, the reverse of the journey the sisters dream of in *Three Sisters*. And her interests, I think, are not exactly Chekhov's. Some valuable work has been done recently on Chekhov's relations with formal religion, but it is perverse to pay attention to such issues in so short a study: Chekhov was, surely, the most worldly and secular of Russian writers. He very rarely even troubled to attack religion and its human manifestations. An exception is the assault on faith in "In the Hollow"—a story Malcolm rather startlingly misreads on this score, failing to see how thoroughly Chekhov damned the consolations offered by a belief in the afterlife. Quite simply, Chekhov wasn't particularly interested. The Jewish question, which emerges in Malcolm's attempts to visit a Moscow synagogue, is certainly a big one in contemporary Russia, but is not one that seems to have engaged Chekhov very extensively.

When Malcolm writes about Chekhov's relations with his family, there is a distinct and rather damaging mismatch of cultures. She quotes two splendid letters to his brothers. In one he told Niko-

lai, "You have only one failing ... your utter lack of culture," and set out what he saw as the virtues and dignity of the cultured outlook. In the other he berated Alexander for treatment of his common-law wife that was "unworthy of a decent, loving human being." Malcolm reads this in a contemporary Freudian manner:

Not being an actual firstborn, Chekhov evidently never felt comfortable in the firstborn's posture of superiority, and expressed his dislike of the censorious side of himself by stacking the deck against his fictional representations of it: von Koren and Lvov [characters in "The Duel" and "Ivanov"] are "right," but there is something the matter with them; they are cold fish. Chekhov, in his relationship with his older brothers, brings to mind the biblical Joseph. Chekhov's "sourceless maturity"—like Joseph's—may well have developed during his enforced separation from the family ... Chekhov's love for his big brothers transcended his anger with them; he evidently never entirely shed his little brother's idealization of them.

There is a troubling sense here that Malcolm thinks that European culture, then and since, placed the same value on intimate and open family relations that contemporary American culture does; like many American commentators on European writers, she fails to see the extremely high value other cultures place on the notion of personal dignity. The subject of *The Cherry Orchard*, "My Life," "In the Hollow," "The Princess," and dozens of other unsparing examinations of domestic conduct is not primarily emotional failure but impropriety. Worryingly, Malcolm seems to think that Chekhov was deploring a failure to talk, a failure to be sufficiently loving and sharing.

Chekhov is a notoriously difficult writer from whom to draw general conclusions—that is at the heart of his greatness. But it seems to me that on the whole he thought unhappy families would often be better off if their members stopped talking to one another altogether. What often raised Chekhov to a point of fury was people who behaved without dignity and did not fulfill the obligations of their social position. Curious as this may be in a man whose social ascent was so vertiginous, he rarely con-

ceded the possibility that marriages between unequal partners could work. The vicious portrayal of the sister-in-law in *Three Sisters* is repeated again and again in the stories, and the message is quite unambiguous: if—like Modeste Alekseyevich, in “The Order of St. Anne,” or the hero of “My Life”—one seeks to abandon social position through marriage or behavior, disaster and a terrible loss of dignity inevitably follow. Really, Chekhov was as snobbish as Ouida. The few times he seemed to imagine a happy marriage on unequal terms, in, for instance, “A Woman’s Kingdom” and that magnificent vignette “At a Country House,” he was content to leave the envisaged marriage as a hopeless dream. Of course, like many of the greatest Russian writers, he could also be fascinated and excited when a character helplessly disobeyed the demands of propriety: the sublime moment in *War and Peace* when the Princess Bolkonsky declares her love, and the social abdication at the heart of *The Idiot*, are rivaled by Chekhov at the climax of “The Princess” and in the beautiful abandonment of “A Lady With a Dog.” But he saw no happiness proceeding from such moments. Good and curious as Malcolm’s study is, one feels throughout that it is a period piece in a way Chekhov would not have appreciated and might not even have understood.

Chekhov will survive the adulation of his admirers, and the limitations inadvertently placed on him by such homage direct our attention to the gigantic range of his intelligence. Even a genius like Mansfield or Pritchett or Raymond Carver strikes us now as starting from a particular moment in the indefinite history of our engagement with Chekhov; with every re-reading the most careful reader of the master will see more, and become more painfully aware that his mind, his powers of observation, were larger than ours to an inconceivable degree. His subjects were confined and specific, and he was the great poet of the provincial. But when an observer as sophisticated and open as Janet Malcolm looks at him, the conclusion is painful and inescapable: our limitations are rigid and proximate; to Chekhov’s genius no limits have yet been plausibly proposed. ■

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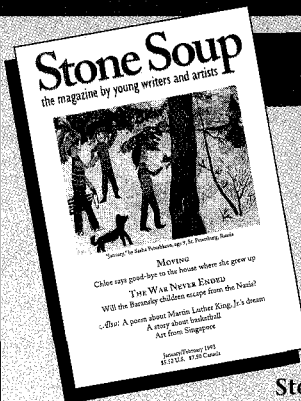
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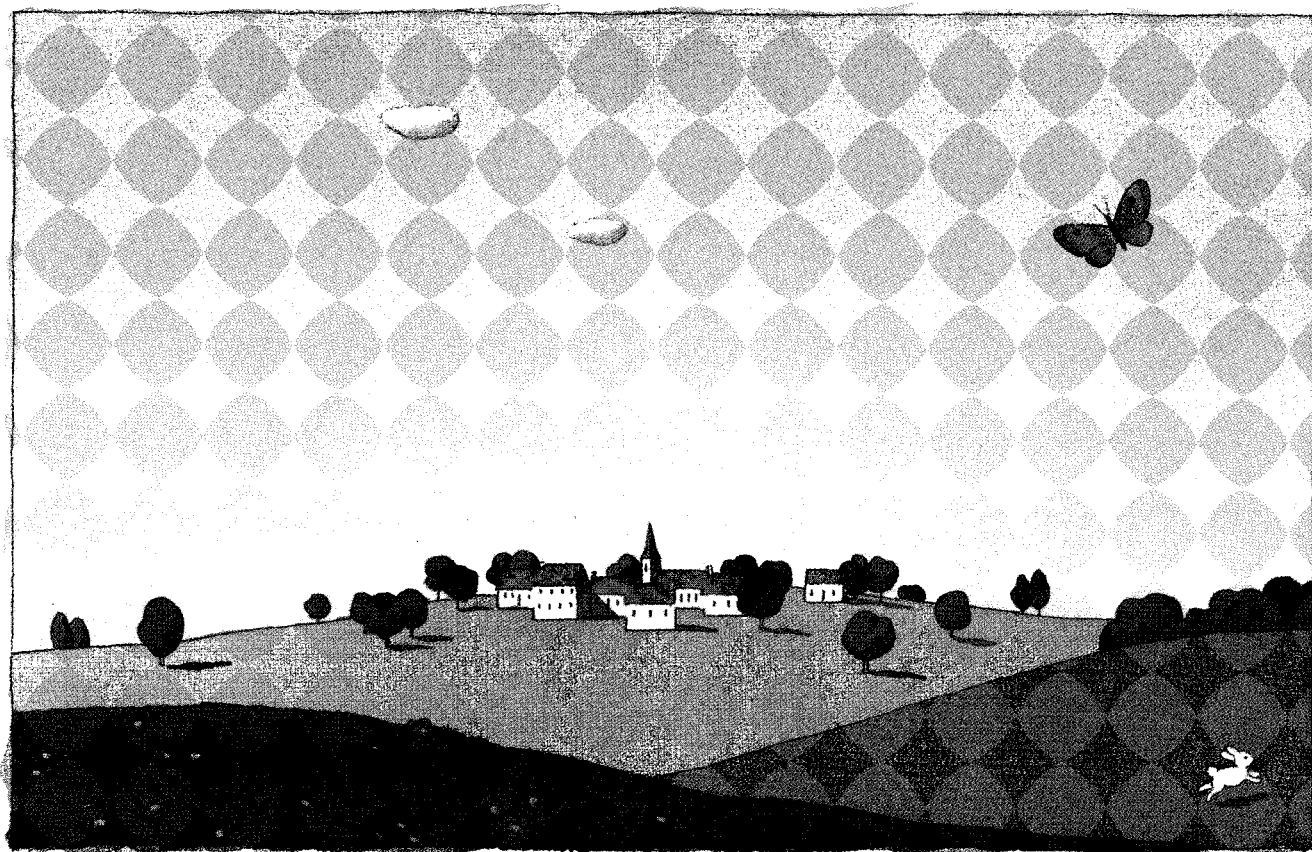
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BOOKS

THE LAND OF COUNTERPANE

Jan Karon lets her readers pull the covers over their heads

BY MARTHA SPAULDING

.....

Mitford, North Carolina (pop. 1,000), nestled in a lush valley in the Blue Ridge Mountains, is a turn-of-the-century creekside town where the air sparkles and flowers abound. Its residents are mostly decent, neighborly types whose lives are framed by the beauty and weather of the changing seasons and the recurrence of annual events. They care for one another, have little to do with the outside world, and resist change. Looking down from a hill on the town he loves, Father Timothy Kavanagh, the rector of Mitford's Episcopal Church, sees "a wide panorama of rich Flemish colors under a perfectly blue and cloudless sky," with ploughed farmland "like velveteen scraps on a quilt, feather-stitched with hedgerows." He calls it the Land of Counterpane.

Father Tim and his enviable town are responsible for the astonishing success of Jan Karon, a sixty-four-year-

old former advertising executive whose six books about Mitford—*At Home in Mitford* (1994), *A Light in the Window* (1995), *These High, Green Hills* (1996), *Out to Canaan* (1997), *A New Song* (1999), and *A Common Life: The Wedding Story* (2001)—now total eight million copies in print. *A Common Life* topped Amazon.com's best-seller list for two weeks before publication day and entered *The Wall Street Journal's* at No. 1. *A New Song* passed *Monica's Story* to reach No. 1 on Amazon's list in the spring of 1999. The following summer Hallmark issued a line of greeting cards, party goods, and gift items based on Mitford scenes and buildings. As many as 1,400 readers have turned out to see Karon in such diverse places as Prairie Village, Kansas; Lynchburg, Virginia; Sewickley, Pennsylvania; and Madison, Connecticut, and fans had already sent her some 12,000 pieces of

mail by the time *A New Song* appeared. Karon's success is astonishing in part because her books are considered Christian fiction—a category that, according to *Publishers Weekly*, "barely existed 20 years ago"; Viking Penguin took the series over from Lion Publishing, a small religious house, in 1996. Karon told *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* in 1999, "We have uncovered a huge, hungry audience for books that don't amputate the spiritual from the rest of life."

Rarely have these books been reviewed by a major newspaper; their initial success derived from "hand-selling" in independent bookstores (*At Home in Mitford* was thrice nominated for an ABBY Award by the American Booksellers Association), word of mouth, and cagey marketing and promotion by Karon and her publishers. (And, perhaps, from a felicitous confusion: In the spring of 1997 Oprah Winfrey chose *The Rapture of Canaan*, by Sheri Reynolds, for her book club. *Out to Canaan* followed Reynolds's book up the charts. When asked by the *Sacramento Bee* if there was a connection, Karon replied, "I really don't know. But it is rather odd that the name of an ancient biblical site is on

YAN NASCIMBENE

the title of two books in 1997, don't you think?") In the end the books have sold themselves.

Father Tim is a conscientious and loving sexagenarian workaholic who tends his garden as he tends his flock, and prays every morning, "Father, make me a blessing to someone today." His love interest is Cynthia Coppersmith, an attractive and successful children's book author in her middle fifties who lives next door with her white cat, Violet. Their courtship and marriage is a dominant theme in the series. The rector informally adopts Dooley Barlowe, a sullen, rough-spoken boy from a broken home, and helps him to become a well-educated and affectionate teenager. Father Tim is himself adopted—in the opening chapter of the series—by Barnabas, a large black dog who jumps and licks with abandon until he hears a quotation from Scripture. Around this core moves a host of colorful constants, including the garrulous Emma Garrett, Father Tim's part-time secretary; Sadie Baxter, the mistress of Fernbank, one of Mitford's grand houses, and a generous benefactor with a tragic history; and the schizophrenic Miss Rose and her long-suffering husband, Uncle Billy, whose specialty is jokes of the *Reader's Digest* variety. Karon's strong suit is pacing: every chapter is composed of short takes that end with a neat summing up or a bit of wry humor—perfect for the modern attention span, and saving her the trouble of writing transitions. Her characters are, like those of a good sit-com, superficial but memorable, and her snappy dialogue is often smile-out-loud funny.

To visit Mitford is to enter a cleaner, simpler life, without fast-food restaurants, video arcades, or even traffic. The shopkeepers on Main Street maintain garden plots between their quaint enterprises: the Happy Endings Bookstore, the Sweet Stuff Bakery, the Collar Button (menswear), The Local (groceries and produce). Regulars gather for breakfast and lunch at the Main Street Grill, where town doings more than suffice for conversation. Mayor Esther Cunningham discourages tourism, saying that Mitford "would simply like to be the pause that refreshes." Mitford's women bake cakes, tote casseroles, and arrange flowers. Mit-

ford's men are hardworking, respectful toward their women, and upright. At a fundraising festival Mitford's four clergymen push peanuts down Main Street with their noses, and Mayor Cunningham kisses a pig. People will drop what they're doing and race in their cars to see a sunset. But most important, Mitford is a place where God is alive and well, and keeps a finger on every pulse.

"In my books I try to depict not a glorious faith with celestial fireworks, but a daily faith, a routine faith, a seven-days-a-week faith," Karon has said. Prayer suffuses the lives of Father Tim and his parishioners, and nothing is too small to ask God for, whether it be help with a recalcitrant dog or keeping a feverish boy "in bed and out of mischief." When it comes to something big, a prayer chain can be galvanized with a phone call. Quotations from Scripture pepper everyday speech ("Philippians four-thirteen, for Pete's sake") as well as reining in Barnabas. Grace cannot be earned and isn't about deserving in any case: it's free. Salvation can come from turning one's life over to Jesus Christ with a simple prayer. "It isn't a test you have to pass," Father Tim tells a stranger he finds kneeling in the empty church. "It doesn't require discipline and intelligence ... not even strength and perseverance. It only requires faith." In a tidy two-for-one the rector saves both the stranger—a traveling businessman—and a jewel thief who is listening from his hiding place in the church attic.

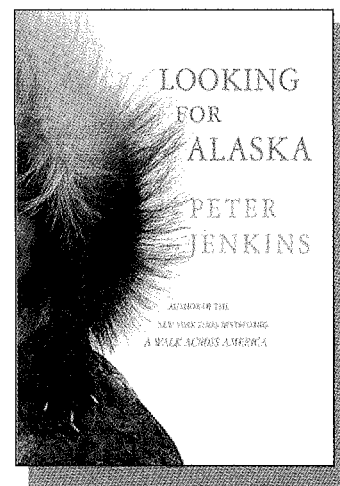
No doubt the promise of such easy union with the divine is a large part of what has made Karon successful. But authentic or not, it strikes this Yankee Unitarian sensibility as Sunday-school religion: memorize a Bible verse and get a Jesus sticker. Indeed, the very fact that Karon wallows in sweetness and light may disqualify her books from being "Christian fiction." In the words of John Updike,

It is striking how dark ... the human condition appears ... in the fiction of Waugh and Spark and Graham Greene and Flannery O'Connor. We scan them for a glimpse of mollifying holiness, and get instead a cruel drumming upon this world's emptiness. To be Christian in this day and

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age ... is to be unorthodox, and readers should look elsewhere for the consolations of conventional sentiment and the popular, necessary religion of optimism ... Is not Christian fiction ... a description of the bewilderment and panic, the sense of hollowness and futility, which afflicts those whose search for God is not successful? And are we not all, within the churches and temples or not, more searcher than finder in this regard?

What *Kirkus Reviews* in 1996 called Karon's "literary equivalent of comfort food" would seem to appeal primarily to middle-aged women who don't care to hear about sex or violence or to read any swear words, not even "damn." (Karon says that at the age of ten she got a whipping from her grandmother after she wrote a story containing "a word that Rhett Butler used.") At the Canadian Booksellers Association convention in June of 1999 Karon said that Mitford readers "are celebrating the sweet ordinariness of life in the face of the horror that's on every news channel and in every newspaper, and in the face of every women's magazine that instead of showing you how to bake a casserole tells you how to have a better orgasm." According to *Newsweek*, "[Karon] and her readers, she insists, are one and the same, a sort of cultural silent majority of good-hearted, God-fearing squares ignored by Hollywood and New York publishers."

Though Father Tim and Cynthia exchange "lingering" kisses while he luxuriates in her faint wisteria scent, they are chaste before marriage; he is boyishly nervous in anticipation of their pre-marital counseling.

Here he was in his bishop's office, seated next to his sweetheart, and only minutes away, they'd be talking about sex. He felt the blood surge to his head, coloring his face like a garden tomato ...

"Praying together affirms you as one flesh [the bishop said], and, among the endless benefits it bestows, it can greatly enhance your sexual communication ... As you seek to know what you can do for the other, you will surely receive your own inexpressible delight ... To put it simply, making love confirms your spiritual relationship, and your spiritual relationship will deepen your lovemaking. It all moves in a wondrous circle."

Well, that wasn't too bad. And that's all there is.

"Father Tim is an ordinary human being, a decent human being," Karon told *The Orlando Sentinel* in 1999. "And you know there aren't that many clergymen like him in novels anymore. Ever since Elmer Gantry polluted the waters ... they're all running off with the choir director or doing something worse." (In *A New Song* the choir director runs off with the organist.) Father Tim probably reminds a lot of Mitford fans of their own fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. He drives himself in his work, facing an unending parade of spiritual needs and practical demands: spelling a woman who lives with her senile mother, taking livermush (a local delicacy) to his bedridden sexton, baking a ham for a parish wedding, tending to the leaks in Miss Sadie's roof. He has diabetes, and must discipline himself to jog and watch his diet. He seethes inwardly at Emma Garrett's bossy interference. His difficulty in making a commitment to Cynthia and his clumsy letter-writing while she is away create some rocky patches in their romance. He approaches retirement with fear and denial. He worries about his thinning hair.

Newsweek has called Karon "a marketing wizard" who is "every bit as sincere as she is slick." She personally telephoned and visited bookstores to get her early books rolling. Her bi-annual newsletter, *More From Mitford*, available free to subscribers either by mail or on the Internet (www.penguinputnam.com/mitford), combines spiritual advice, answers to readers' questions, and excerpts from fan letters with tour schedules and teasers from forthcoming books. Karon says that as a little girl she dreamed of being a preacher before she dreamed of being a writer. She has achieved both, and her fans have the quality of disciples: describing one appearance by the author, *Newsweek* said, "When members of the ... audience talked about Karon, they sounded like they were describing a wise friend who had helped them through a crisis." They write things like "You've helped recharge my inner battery." "I've given your books to many of my friends in

hope that their lives and their faith can be renewed as mine have been." "I feel the embrace of heaven through your books." "We feel uplifted, other-oriented, and involved ... You teach us how to live!"

Karon's own life—or what little she is willing to reveal about it—is fairly inspirational too. Her father left home when she was three, and she was raised by her grandparents. She dropped out of school after eighth grade; by the age of eighteen she had a baby daughter, but her marriage was over. She went to work as a receptionist in an ad agency, and when she left advertising in order to write, in 1988, she was an agency vice-president. Should she decide to write an autobiography, it would no doubt rival her previous books in sales. She promises two more Mitford novels before the series ends: *In This Mountain* (2003) and *Light From Heaven* (2005). But Father Tim won't die.

Jan Karon has been compared to Miss Read (Dora Saint), James Herriot, Garrison Keillor, and even (I'm pained to report) Anthony Trollope. But she lacks Saint's deliciously British irony, Herriot's vividness, Keillor's art, and Trollope's depth. (The only pearls one is likely to encounter in her pages are the quotations, sprinkled throughout, from eminent theologians and other thinkers and writers; a similar collection makes up *Patches of Godlight: Father Tim's Favorite Quotes*, published in September.) The Mitford books are short on wit, poetry, and insight, long on comfort, encouragement, and a dependable, well-timed leavening of humor. They seem to me like children's books for adults.

Cute (and mysteriously mutable) maps of Mitford appear at the front of the books, evoking old children's board games: Uncle Wiggily, Enchanted Forest, Park and Shop. Every chapter opens with a simple line drawing of one or more characters. Father Tim perennially finds himself in what used to be called scrapes: Trying to bathe Barnabas before company comes, he's hog-tied by the dog's leash. He pursues Violet up onto Cynthia's roof and down

through her coal chute. Picnicking, he and Cynthia encounter a (fortunately benign) bull. He leaps from a moving car to escape Edith Mallory, Mitford's Cruella DeVille, whose hand is on his thigh. He and Cynthia get lost in a cave, and although the experience is painted as a spiritual turning point ("God was fully in control—firmly and finally and awfully—and he knew it for the first time in his heart, instead of in his head"), I could think only of Tom Sawyer and Injun Joe. Father Tim plays detective in Hardy Boys fashion—finding stolen gems in a columbarium urn, and flying with Omer Cunningham, the mayor's barnstorming brother-in-law, on an aerial reconnaissance of Edith Mallory's estate. Treasures turn up in Fernbank's attic, and Miss Sadie secretly bequeaths a fortune to Dooley Barlowe. Father Tim's God is a little like the mother rabbit in Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny*. Is it significant that Karon has a sign outside her cottage in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, that reads PETER RABBIT SLEPT HERE?

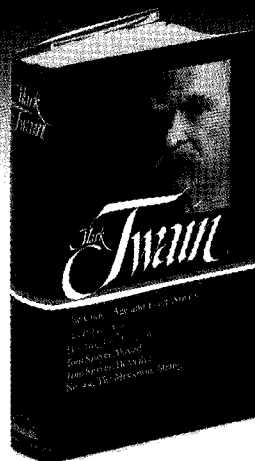
True, there are some dark doings in Mitford: child abuse and neglect, alcoholism, violent rages. Pauline Barlowe, Dooley's mother, is set afire by her domestic partner. A foul band of drug dealers kidnaps Barnabas. A slovenly woman claiming to be Father Tim's cousin from Ireland writes pornography in the rectory guest room. But these events rest uneasily (sometimes incongruously) on a foundation of softball games, parish teas, and rummage sales. Resolutions are sometimes glib or even offstage, in a manner befitting a world where bits of Scripture are genuinely antidotal.

Under the covers is the safest, coziest place a child can be—and Mitford offers that kind of place. Robert Louis Stevenson's poem made of the bed both a happy playground for the imagination and a contained and orderly world.

[I] sometimes sent my ships in fleets
All up and down among the sheets;
Or brought my trees and houses out,
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still
That sits upon the pillow-hill,
And sees before him, dale and plain
The pleasant Land of Counterpane. 

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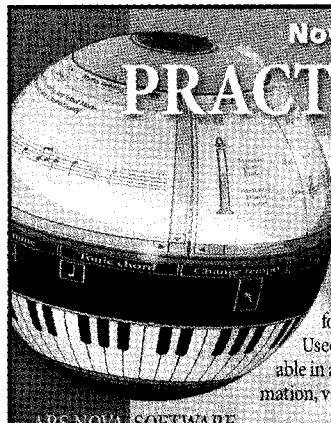
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*Osama bin Laden's mindset; two extraordinary novels;
the peaceful collapse of "The Evil Empire"*

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A few hours after the first American air strikes against Afghanistan, on October 7, a pre-recorded videotape was broadcast around the world. A tall, skinny man with a scraggly beard, wearing a camouflage fatigue jacket and the headdress of a desert tribesman, an AK-47 assault rifle at his side, stood placidly before a rocky backdrop. In measured language Osama bin Laden again declared war on the United States. Only a few weeks before, bin Laden's statement would likely have been dismissed as the inflated rhetoric of a saber-rattling braggart. But with the World Trade Center laid to waste, the Pentagon heavily damaged, and the wreckage of a hijacked plane strewn across a field in rural Pennsylvania, his declamation was taken very seriously indeed. Precisely how bin Laden achieved this feat is the subject of Peter Bergen's unusually astute book. Bergen, an Oxford-educated television journalist who in 1997 produced the first televised interview with bin Laden, is one of only a few Americans who have actually met him—a fact that alone endows *Holy War, Inc.* with a perspective that none of bin Laden's other biographers can claim. Moreover, Bergen's research took him not only to Afghanistan but also to the place where the bin Laden family originated, in the isolated Hadramawt region of Yemen, and to Pakistan, Egypt, and Kashmir, among other places. The portrait of bin Laden that Bergen paints is therefore richer and more complex than the image of a hate-filled, mindless fanatic that prevails today.

The broad outline of bin Laden's history is by now well known. The scion of a porter turned construction magnate, whose money-making prowess was perhaps matched only by his ability to pro-



**HOLY WAR, INC.:
INSIDE THE
SECRET WORLD
OF OSAMA BIN
LADEN**

by Peter L. Bergen

Free Press, 297
pages, \$26.00

duce countless progeny and his religious piety, bin Laden sought to make his own mark in life as a patron of *jihad*. Accordingly, in the early 1980s, he was drawn to Afghanistan, where he helped to rally—and even more critical, to fund—the Muslim guerrilla forces resisting that country's Soviet invaders. The guerrillas' success in repelling one of the world's two superpowers had a lasting impact on bin Laden. To his mind, Russia's defeat in Afghanistan set in motion the chain of events that resulted in the collapse of the USSR and the demise of communism. This same reductionism, coupled with an abiding sense of divinely ordained historical inevitability, today convinces bin Laden that he and his fighters cannot but triumph in the struggle against America.

Where *Holy War, Inc.* shines is less in the recounting of these familiar details than in Bergen's insight into bin Laden's mindset and behavior. For example, Bergen notes, bin Laden is a graduate of Saudi Arabia's prestigious King Abdul-Aziz University, where he obtained a degree in economics and public administration in 1981. According to Bergen, he subsequently cut his teeth in the family business and later used corporate-management techniques he had learned in the classroom and on the job to transform al Qaeda (Arabic for "the Base"), which he founded, into the world's pre-eminent terrorist organization. Bin Laden achieved this by cleverly combining an Islamic fundamentalist world view with the technological munificence of modernity: al Qaeda operatives, for example, encrypt messages on Macintosh or Toshiba computers, communicate by e-mail or on Internet bulletin boards, use satellite telephones, and fly first class. As Bergen explains, "this grafting of entirely modern sensibilities and techniques to the most radical interpretation of holy war is the hallmark of bin Laden's network." Bergen offers the professionally produced and edited two-hour al Qaeda recruitment videotape that bin Laden circulated

throughout the Middle East last summer (which also subtly presaged the September 11 attacks) as an example of bin Laden's nimble exploitation of "twenty-first-century communications and weapons technology in the service of the most extreme, retrograde reading of holy war." The tape, with its footage of "infidels" attacking Muslims in Chechnya, Kashmir, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Indonesia; of children starving under the yoke of UN economic sanctions in Iraq; and of the accursed "Crusader" military forces in the holy land of Arabia, was subsequently converted to DVD format for ease in copying onto computers and uploading to the World Wide Web for global dissemination.

"All men dream: but not equally," wrote T. E. Lawrence, the legendary Lawrence of Arabia. "Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible." Bergen sees bin Laden as one of those dangerous men. Indeed, in an age arguably devoid of ideological leadership, when the impersonal forces of economic determinism and globalization are thought to have erased the ability of a single man to affect the course of history, bin Laden—despite our efforts—managed to taunt us and to strike at us for years even before September 11. His effective melding of religious fervor, Muslim piety, and a profound sense of grievance into a powerful ideological force—however invidious and repugnant—stands as an undeniably towering accomplishment. Bin Laden cast this struggle as precisely the "clash of civilizations" that America and its coalition partners have labored so hard to avoid. "This is a matter of religion and creed; it is not what Bush and Blair maintain, that it is a war against terrorism," he declared in a videotaped speech broadcast over the Al Jazeera television network on November 3. "There is no way to forget the hostility between us and the infidels. It is ideological, so Muslims have to ally themselves with Muslims."

As Bergen makes clear, bin Laden has been an intelligent, crafty, and formidable adversary. *Holy War, Inc.* should be

required reading for anyone seeking to understand him. —BRUCE HOFFMAN

Margaret Atwood once taught a course, at New York University, on southern-Canadian gothic literature. This sounds like a joke, but it isn't: a strain of the melodramatic, touched with grotesquerie, magic realism, and gallows humor, runs through much of Robertson Davies, Michael Ondaatje, Timothy Findley, and Atwood herself, to mention only a few prominent writers from up north. Certainly this throat-grIPPING novel by David Adams Richards (a winner of Canada's Giller Prize) displays an almost Faulknerian excess: its heroes are Christ-like idiot-saints, its villains as over the top as the Snopeses, the diction odd and gnarly in an old-fashioned, almost scriptural way, and the plot—well, the plot is a medley of nefarious doings, dark revelations, and tragic coincidences, not to mention heartbreaking deaths.

Mercy Among the Children focuses on the Hendersons: the father, who as a young man nearly killed a friend and subsequently vowed never again to hurt any human being; the mother, an orphan of astonishing beauty and gentleness; and their children—Lyle, who yearns for acceptance from the New Brunswick town that scorns his poverty-stricken family; his albino sister, artistic and fiercely intelligent; and his brother, a child of almost preternatural sensitivity to nature and the world around him.

Unfortunately, the very gentleness and rectitude of the Hendersons dooms them to be forever victimized, whether by roughneck louts or by the local tycoon, who has polluted the water supply. Mrs. Henderson is eventually accused of theft, Mr. Henderson of blowing up a bridge; yet never once do they waver in their simple faith or love for each other. But Lyle, alas, finds himself susceptible to the allure of our fallen world: "There is no worse flaw in man's character than that of wanting to belong."



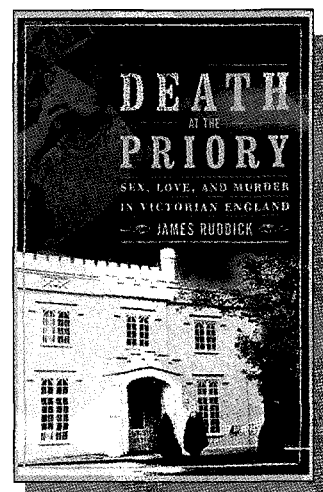
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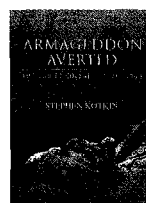
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Richards's story is multi-generational, intricate, and doleful, though some readers may feel that he goes too far with such soap-opera elements as illegitimate births and unexpected bloodlines. Still, I find that he conveys his moral vision so fiercely, and he addresses the question of how one should live with such urgent seriousness, that he simply sweeps away all objections. Read twenty pages and you'll surrender to *Mercy Among the Children*—and to its language. Look closely, for instance, at the novel's resolute and avaricious femme fatale, with "her swaying way that seemed to squander so much, like the scent of late-summer flowers, the overripe apple bins of fall." Pity the desperate Voteur family: "Their door faced the bay, but like so many rural houses of the poor they were surrounded by land and owned no property, had the bay in front of them and never had a boat."

At one point Lyle describes himself as "a thug with Tolstoy in my pocket." I suspect that Richards himself kept Tolstoy in his pocket—especially the later Tolstoy—when he wrote this dark parable about the rewards of goodness and the wages of sin. —MICHAEL DIRDA

This briskly written, elegantly argued book is a triumph of the art of contemporary history. In fewer than 200 pages the Princeton historian Stephen Kotkin elucidates the implosion of the Soviet empire—the most important and startling series of international events of the past fifty years—and clearly spells out why, thanks almost entirely to the "principled restraint" of the Soviet leadership, that collapse didn't result in a cataclysmic war, as nearly all experts had long forecast. Eschewing the fashionable academic focus on social movements, and the related notion that the Soviet downfall was owing to an uncontrollable wave of popular support for democracy—and also countering the self-congratulatory idea that unrelenting ideological and military pressure from the West led to the



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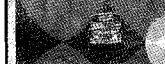
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USSR's demise, Kotkin concentrates instead on Soviet elites, persuasively arguing that the collapse was the outcome of Mikhail Gorbachev's "pursuit of a romantic dream" of socialist reform.

That dream was rooted in Gorbachev's sincere belief (shared, as Kotkin shows, by most of the Soviet people) in socialism as "a higher and more humane system than capitalism." To Gorbachev and many of his generation of Communist Party leaders, socialism had been perverted by Stalin and corrupted by Brezhnev and his geriatric associates and successors. Lamenting the destruction of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring, in 1968, Gorbachev and his fellows sought to create "socialism with a human face," as the earlier Czechoslovakian reformers had termed their aspiration. (In 1987, when a Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman was asked what the difference was between Gorbachev's *perestroika* and the Prague Spring, he replied, "Nineteen years.") Indeed, Kotkin argues, Gorbachev originally and ardently believed that *perestroika* sought only to reclaim "the ideals of the October revolution." (In the early years of reform Gorbachev actually rewrote his speeches to include more Marxist-Leninist theory than even his apparatchik speechwriters had incorporated.) But Soviet socialism, rotten at the core and from its inception, proved immedicable, and the quest to recapture what he (erroneously, I believe) thought to be its founding ideals ultimately led Gorbachev to repudiate not merely the perversions of Leninism but Leninism itself (just as Lenin, who abhorred any form of romantic idealism, would have predicted). Jeanne Kirkpatrick's notion that (friendly) authoritarian states were preferable to the "totalitarian" Soviet Union because only the former were capable of reform breaks down completely under the weight of Kotkin's analysis: the Soviet Union not only reformed itself, it reformed itself out of existence.

Just before the Soviet collapse the historian Paul Kennedy noted that "historically, none of the overextended, multinational empires ever retreated to their own ethnic base until they had been defeated in a great power war." But the Soviet Union acceded to the liquidation not only of its political and economic sys-

tem but of its empire, and thus relinquished all the territory it had gained in the most destructive struggle in world history. Kotkin's most valuable contribution lies in reminding us, in chilling detail, that this outcome was hardly preordained. The Soviet leadership could have used its immense military and internal-security apparatus to hold power, regardless of the cost. Yet even while it was faltering, the USSR "did not even attempt to stage a cynical foreign war to rally support for the regime." And, of course, as Western analysts had always feared, "even if Soviet leaders had calculated that they were doomed, they could have wreaked terrifying havoc out of spite, or engaged in blackmail." Instead, under Gorbachev's leadership the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the vanguard of world socialist revolution, abolished itself with barely a whimper. Never has the Nobel Peace Prize been more appropriately awarded than to the man who in the end proved more devoted to a romantic dream than to the state he had served for nearly forty years. —BENJAMIN SCHWARZ

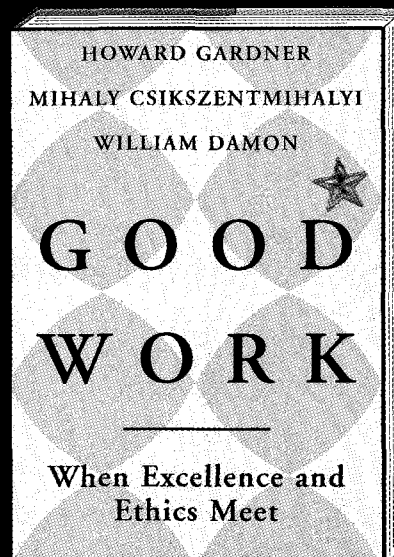
Hotel World, the second novel by the young Scottish writer Ali Smith, was one of the six short-listed for England's 2001 Booker Prize. It has received tremendous accolades in the British press, and Smith has been compared to Faulkner, Joyce, Woolf, and (inevitably) Dave Eggers. The novel's easy allusiveness, playful engagement with literary theory, and bold experimentation have all earned high praise.

Well, it's all true; but don't let it put you off. Yes, there are plenty of what are usually referred to as "literary pyrotechnics" in this book, but it is above all a visceral piece of work, as affecting a novel as any that has been published for a long time. Experimentation that would be merely pretentious in a lesser writer—much of *Hotel World* is written in stream-of-consciousness monologues, extremely difficult to maintain over



HOTEL WORLD
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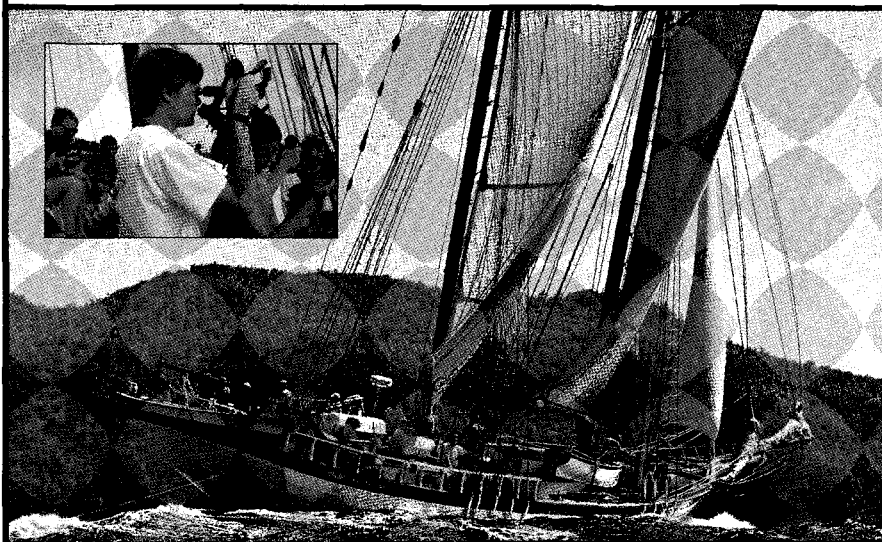
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more than a few pages—works here almost magically.

The novel is built around a recent tragedy: nineteen-year-old Sara Wilby, on the second night of her new job as a chambermaid at the Global Hotel, climbed into the dumbwaiter on a bet; the cables snapped, and she plunged four stories to her death. Now her disoriented spirit, only half remembering its former life, wanders around looking for clues to its past—even seeking out its body, entering the coffin, passing “through the lid of the wooden room, smooth and costly on the outside, chipboard-cheap at the centre.” (The subsequent conversation between body and soul is one of several moments in the novel in which Smith obliquely invokes the metaphysical poets.)

Sara's spirit grieves most of all for the felt reality of the physical world, now lost forever. “Imagine an itch. Imagine a foot, and a pavement beneath it, and a stone, and pressing the stone with my whole weight hard into the skin of the sole ... or the small ball of muscle that keeps a body upright and balanced and moving across the breathtaking still-hard surface of the world.” As life and its memories slowly fade, Sara's ghost tries to impart a message to the living creatures she glimpses, an inversion of Muriel Spark's *memento mori*: “Remember you must live.”

Smith expands the narrative to include other characters: a homeless woman who begs outside the Global Hotel; a kind girl who works at the reception desk; a narcissistic guest. When Sara's devastated younger sister comes to the hotel on a mission she hardly understands herself, this odd group combines to help her accept her loss.

Hotel World is one of those rare books that are simultaneously sad and hopeful. Smith maintains a rhapsodic pace that slackens, very slightly, only toward the end of the narrative. Startlingly accomplished and, for all her literary tricks, a smooth and straight storyteller, Smith has proved to be one of Britain's major talents. —BROOKE ALLEN

Recent books by *Atlantic* authors:

Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos, by Robert D. Kaplan. Random House, 224 pages, \$19.95. Robert Kaplan is an *Atlantic* correspondent.

MR. GOODBAR REDUX

Illusions. Affectation. Lies. This is the insidious and incapacitating legacy of modern dating books

BY CRISTINA NEHRING

.....

Lyndon McGill wanted to know how people fell in love. So he decided, he confides in *The Mating Game* (1992), "to take a field trip to a farm and observe the animals." He was soon witnessing the copulation of a cow and a bull. "Coupling continued for a few minutes," he reports, "and then, without warning, the cow suddenly pulled away and ran to the opposite side of the corral ... I recalled how our family dog had behaved similarly." McGill's conclusion? To keep a man's interest, a woman must rise abruptly after sex and leave the room, the city, or even the country. It rekindles the man's desire. As McGill explains with a flourish, it's "just like taking a bone away from a dog." Such is the state of contemporary dating research in America.

If *The Mating Game* is a particularly unfortunate example of the proliferating genre of dating-advice books, it is not very different in substance from its companions. Its advice to women is that of the *New York Times* best seller *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* (1995), by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider: Make him miss you! Be mean to him so he'll be nice to you! It is the wisdom of John Gray's stunningly successful *Mars and Venus* series: Man is the pursuer. Make him pursue you. Although perfunctory contempt for such books is taken for granted among America's intelligentsia, guilty fascination with them is equally evident. Dating books are like traffic accidents: everybody says they're awful, and everybody sneaks a look at them.

Little is easier than poking fun at most of these seduction manuals—at their cartoonish view of human nature, their bulleted lists of proven ploys, their quadruple exclamation points, and their sometimes bludgeoningly repetitive self-promotion ("You're not doing *The Rules!* ... You have to do *The*

Rules! We suggest you try *The Rules* for six months before doing anything else. You can't do *The Rules* and something else ... Just do *The Rules!*"). Nothing is easier than laughing at their gimmicks. Dilate your pupils, says *How to Make Anyone Fall in Love With You* (1996), by Leil Lowndes: the "copulatory gaze plays a big role in lovemaking." "Massage your neck with one hand," says *Date Like a Man* (2000), by Myreah Moore and Jodie Gould. "It has the effect of raising the breast ... which is erotic." Go to the bathroom in a restaurant, says Gray's *Mars and Venus on a Date* (1997): it gives men the chance to see you. "Read the obituaries," says *How to Meet the Rich: For Business, Friendship, or Romance* (1999), by Ginie Sayles.

If the gimmicks range from bizarre to morbid, the contradictions among—and within—these books go from insidious to incapacitating. Never let a man know you're interested, says *The Rules*. Rent a billboard and trumpet your love

("Bill Thomas, what are you waiting for? Give me a call so I can show you why we are made for each other! Love, Ginnie"), says *Date Like a Man*. Postpone sex, say *The Rules*, *Mars and Venus*, and *Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments* (2000), by Shmuley Boteach. "Men are businessmen," Boteach writes: if they're getting sex without a ring, they won't produce the ring. Unless they happen to be millionaires. "Sex usually begins soon with the rich," declares *How to Meet the Rich*. "Do you really think someone will marry you because he just has to have sex with you?" Ginie Sayles also provides my favorite contradiction of all—coming, as it does, from a book that suggests (among other gambits) that you invent an out-of-town job and fake a move far away to provoke a proposal: Don't play games. "If you play games, you have to be prepared to have someone play them with you."

In fact, no matter how deceitful these books urge you to be, a common denominator among them—and probably a key to American self-image in our moment in history—is that they also urge you to be "true to yourself"; they all tout "self-esteem," not merely as the highest of virtues in general but also as the source and end of their instruc-



Roy Lichtenstein, *In the Car*, 1963

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tions in particular. Thus *The Rules* tells you that to suppress the urge to call your boyfriend constitutes “self-esteem”; its competitor, *The Real Rules* (1997), by Barbara De Angelis, says that “Old Rules” like these “sabotage your self-esteem,” and intones that *real* self-esteem consists precisely in *making* that call. No matter what game they advocate, they want self-esteem on their team. Self-esteem is to popular psychology what God is to fundamentalism—the banner under which you fight, no matter for what desperate or cruel thing you are fighting.

As a genre these books draw astonishing numbers of readers. Many of these doubtless consider themselves ironic and atypical; but ironic audiences are often the most faithful of all. Nor are they motivated, as one might suppose, mainly by curiosity about all matters erotic. In fact, the assumption in all this literature is that its audience is not pleasure-seeking but desperate; not confident, adventuresome, and looking for tips on how to have a good time, but frightened and looking for hints on how to avoid disaster—how to avoid further time as a single girl. Because, yes, 95 percent of these books are written to women. When men do the writing, they present themselves as avuncular advisers to panicking girls—the few good wolves helping the sheep. Men are bad, they seem to admit: they “use women for sex,” declares the smiling threesome Bradley Gerstman, Christopher Pizzo, and Rich Seldes, in *What Men Want* (1998), and “if [they] didn’t have to marry, [they] wouldn’t.” But the larger question that emerges from these books is not so much why men don’t want to marry (supposing this were true) as why women want *so much* to marry. Or why these writers *think* they should want so much to marry, quickly and at any cost. Face it, say the self-styled “Rules Girls” Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, “most women want to be proposed to *yesterday*.” Most women who begin dating an appealing man “bring up marriage or the future after a couple of weeks.” Is this true? If it is, one cannot help thinking that men’s much

lamented “resistance to commitment” is thoroughly sane. What man could feel, under such circumstances, like anything but a convenient walk-on player in a drama whose substance and staging were established long before his arrival?

One of the most disturbing aspects of these books is, in fact, the extent to which they endeavor to squash women’s penchant for pursuit, adventure, and choice. Rather than allow that women need excitement as much as men do (and can enjoy “conquest,” and—yes—fear the loss of freedom in marriage), they vigorously pretend that the predator instinct is peculiar to men, and then alternately bewail it (Gerstman et al.) and instruct women to fashion themselves into fit prey for it (Fein and Schneider; Gray). After all, “men ... thrive on challenge, ... while women crave security ... This has been true since civilization began” (*Rules II*). Not satisfied to trust in “civilization,” John Gray goes so far as to say that if a woman happens to bear a closer resemblance to “Mars” than to “Venus” (that is, proves more active than passive, more adventuresome than acquiescent), she must use her “Martian” initiative to cultivate “Venutian” passivity. “Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a woman expressing her Martian attributes,” Gray offers disingenuously, “it will backfire”—unless she locks those attributes up in the closet when she leaves the office, and dons a Venutian mask at home. “While dating and finding a fulfilling relationship can be more difficult” for women who have learned to make things happen on their own in the workplace, Gray writes, “all successful women have an incredible ability for self-correction. All a woman needs is the complete awareness ... of the problem, and then she immediately sets out to fix it.” In other words, she exploits her “masculine” determination to affect the “feminine” spinelessness that will presumably recommend her to men.

The tragedy here is not only the terrific gender essentialism but also that these books encourage the extinction of a quality that might allow women

to feel independent and to take pleasure in their relationships—as opposed to fixing their hearts and egos exclusively on marriage. Women possess no more natural taste for boredom or lost opportunity than men do, and—beyond having to decide whether and when to bear children—they have no greater need for certainty and security. But books like these encourage the worst and weakest in them, playing to every fear. They put overwhelming pressure on women to put overwhelming pressure on men to “commit” at a moment and in a way that *nobody* really wants. “As a result of [my] experience,” Shmuley Boteach tells women in *Dating Secrets of the Ten Commandments*,

I now know exactly what it means when a man says he is not ready [for marriage]. He is directing it specifically at you and it is an insult. Don’t take it from him. Preserve your dignity and break off the relationship. If he wants a plaything, he can buy a life-size blow-up Barbie doll.

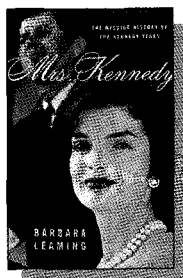
Such testimony, coming from the witty and worldly rabbi who brought us *Kosher Sex*, is appalling. A confident young woman who may be entirely content in her relationship with a boyfriend who has not proposed now has a new way to see things: no proposal is an *insult*—gee. This we have from a man whose personal experience in dating seems somewhat modest: Shmuley (he likes to be addressed familiarly) was engaged at twenty. Such blithe assumption of superior wisdom is, alas, in no way limited to rabbis. When Shmuley and the *Rules* Girls met at a forum in New York in 2000, the main thing they discovered was how often they agreed. Fein and Schneider share his pity (and contempt) for women with no rings to show for their love lives. Indeed, in their books they essentially dismiss every woman who challenges their tenets by demanding, “If you’re so smart, why aren’t you married?” If she *is* married, the question becomes “How long did it take you to get married?” If the answer is much over a year, they strike back with disdain: “*Most girls*,” Fein said to an audience member who admitted to a few years, “don’t want to wait that long!”

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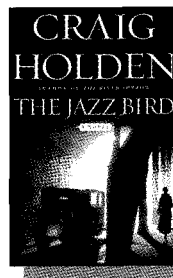
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One of the ironies here is that Fein and Schneider have some extremely gloomy things to say about the marital state. On one hand, they constantly repeat that “A *Rules* marriage is forever,” and that once you’re wed, you can relax their strictures without fear that the man who fell in love because you made yourself scarce will get bored when you become available around the clock—or that the guy who responded so positively to your provocative silences might recoil when you blather on about your daily life (unconvincing reassurances both). On the other hand, they make no bones about the fact that a *Rules* marriage frequently involves accepting your husband’s lack of interest. In fact, it “means acting single ... all over again.” It means doing without the attention and tenderness your courtship led you to expect. But what the hell, say the *Rules* Girls, don’t despair: “after all”—and here comes the clincher—“he *married* you didn’t he?”

It’s easy to scoff at the now divorcing Ellen Fein, but it is more important to note that most of her ring-mongering colleagues never harbored blissful visions of marriage in the first place. John Gray informs us, chasteningly, that “Stage Five” of his multiple-stage dating program is vital, because it provides good memories that allow a couple to survive “the stress of marriage.” The memory of this stage, he says, permits a wife to “reach back and reconnect with the [presumably forgotten] part of her that trusts, accepts, and appreciates her partner ... By remembering the ... loving feelings she experienced” in the past, she will be better able to sustain the unloving present. Is it worth mentioning that John Gray has been through a divorce?

Illusions. Affectation. Lies by omission. Lies by invention. This is the legacy of the majority of modern dating books—and it is a violence to human relationships. With the exception of Shmuley’s *Dating Secrets* and De Angelis’s *The Real Rules*, which advocate a circumscribed honesty, all the books I examined supply advice that explodes whatever trust your partner might feel

in you and whatever comfort you might feel with him. Sometimes the suggested deceit is quite flamboyant: an invented expatriation, a fake rival. More often it is a subtle matter of mis- or under-representing yourself in such a way that you end up feeling that if your mate *really* knew you, he would sicken or tire of you. *The Rules* recommends, for example, that you set a timer so that you can “sweetly” end a phone call with your boyfriend in less than ten minutes and “leave him wanting more”—hardly a morally reprehensible deed, but corrosive in that it forces you to falsify your feelings, to feign a breeziness and busyness that aren’t yours. (“Do not affect a breezy manner,” wrote Strunk and White, style moguls for generations of college composition students. Better advice this, I say, than *The Rules*.) When you start pretending, however incidentally, to be something you’re not (bright and bushy-tailed when you’re pensive, cool when you’re warm), you build walls between yourself and your partner. You feel at once inferior and superior—inferior because your natural instincts are presumably not good enough to please him, superior because you are pulling the wool over his eyes, and we always feel superior to those we fool. This is not a sound basis for intimacy; it’s rather like communicating from different floors of a high-rise.

Worse, you grow dull. That may be the greatest problem with disingenuousness—not that it is unethical but that it is boring. It precludes thinking aloud and thereby precludes conversational discovery. It keeps us from talking about what we know best—our real experience, our present concerns—and instructs us to talk instead about the experience and concerns that we imagine nice people like us *should* have. If “men were entirely honest,” someone once said, “every man’s autobiography would be fascinating.” Since we’re not, even the ten-minute phone chat the *Rules* Girls recommend is likely to be dreary.

In our compartmentalization-happy culture we have separated everything: social from professional relationships, therapeutic from social conversations,

lovers from friends, friends from therapists. One of the noisome results of such compartmentalization is that relationship “experts” warn us incessantly, “If you have to talk, see a therapist.” *Maybe* call your mom. *Don’t* call your boyfriend. An evening with someone you love is no time for a confidence. You must never “use” your desired mate as a “therapist.” We think this with the same misguidedness that prompted Victorian men not to “use” their wives as sexual companions; just as they thought their sexuality sullied their honorable spouses, we think our psychology burdens our healthy partners.

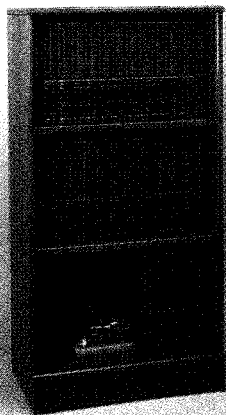
More banal, our dating becomes incredibly arduous. All this putting your best foot forward and never revealing a true or a troubled thought makes dating as one long triple back flip. Dating books admit this—“*The Rules* are difficult!” one says. Dating is hell, another confesses. The authorities would have one believe that going to a bistro is like heading to boot camp: “Make sure you get a good night’s sleep,” *Date Like a Man* advises. “Call your home number and fill up your voice mail with compliments,” suggests Nailah Shami, the author of *Do Not Talk to, Touch, Marry, or Otherwise Fiddle With Frogs: How to Find Prince Charming by Finding Yourself* (2001).

“I often take a long bath beforehand and enjoy a glass of wine or a cup of mint tea to calm my nerves,” Myreah Moore reveals. “While in the bath, take some deep clarifying breaths and start imagining yourself having a good time ... Repeat ‘I’m going to have fun.’” “The only people who think dating is fun,” Nita Tucker counters in *How Not to Stay Single* (1996), “are married people who haven’t done it in years.” She herself found it abominable—but worthwhile, since it secured her a husband.

A strange flip-flop has taken place in Western clichés about relationships: once upon a time *marriage* was seen as the arduous obligation and dating (pre- or extra-marital) was seen as the easy, free, and romantic pleasure. Look at Casanova, George Sand, La Rochefoucauld—or at Ovid. Not one of the

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Across: 1. WI(N)DOW 5. EGOISM (hidden) 10. MA(XI)MA 13. PU + MA (rev.) 15. PEOR(D)A (opera anag.) 18. RE + T + OLD 23. D + ALE 26. B(Y)ROAD 27. TEDIUM (anag.) 28. CEDARS (homophone) Down: 1. WRA + PUP (raw anag.) 2. IMPOSE (anag.) 3. DA(IS)Y 4. O + X + L(I)P 6. GARB (rev.) 7. IL + L(US)ION 8. SLAM (double def.) 9. MO(RA)SS 11. MET(E)ORIC (to crime anag.) 12. BLAZONRY (anag.) 13. PIT + T 14. H(OMEL)AND 16. RITE (homophone) 17. INDIC + T 19. L(O)ITER 20. DINERS (anag.) 21. THROE (homophone) 22. AS + SAD 24. ALO(n)E 25. ZEBU (hidden) Presents: a. TERGIVERSATE (anag.) b. PO(STAG)E'S c. HE + RE + TICS d. NATHAN DETROI + T (a no-hitter and anag.) e. DON + A + TELL + O f. I(M + MIG) + RANT g. PLEBISCITES (anag.) h. C(ON)T + ENDER i. APRIL SHOWERS (anag.) j. S + NO-W IN

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Jack Hannah in *You Will Not Taste Death: Jesus and Epicureanism* recognizes the notes as chronologically ordered and correlative with the skeletal history used in the *Gospel of Mark*. He provides all the text of the notes with comments and Marcan context, thereby developing a narrative of Jesus that is tenably historical.

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The most radical difference, however, is that Epicureanism also shaped Jesus' thought that God and Caesar are man-made authorities, and that one's ultimate authority should be oneself. Hannah's book is 321 pgs., pbk., \$12 postpaid. Please order by check or money order from:

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relationships celebrated in his *Art of Love* is between spouses: marriage, to him and to writers for centuries afterward, involved duty and discipline; dating was where the fun and the liberty lay. If Ovid's contemporaries dismissed marriage, at least they had marvelous visions of affairs. In our day we are moving toward a point where we have positive views of neither—where everything in our love life is grim, everything is *work*. Dating is hell, we think; but its reward is marriage. Marriage is "stress," but its consolation is the memory of dating. What with our fear of singlehood, our Puritan work ethic, our endurance of game playing, and our knowledge of the high divorce rate, we have arranged it so that eros in all its manifestations provokes fear and trembling.

Is it any surprise, then, that so many of today's ambitious university students have no time for relationships until these explicitly serve their career-and-life-advancement programs? Is it any surprise that by the time they do cast a tentative look around for potential partners, they no longer know how to start a relationship, sometimes already feel biologically "behind schedule," and—with gender wars seething on college campuses—may have assimilated a severe mistrust of the opposite sex? Such mistrust is abundantly evident, time and again, in the very books presumably designed to reduce it in the name of relationship building. Take Nailah Shami's *Frogs*. Here is a book that proposes to help women find a loving mate but that actually speaks such bitterness against men, and proves so eager to displace them with "teddy bears, a vibrator ... and girl power records," that it accomplishes precisely the opposite.

Off-putting though it is, this book highlights a problem well: On one hand, women feel that they can and should be responsible for their own "power," both professional and personal; for their own self-esteem; and even for their own sexual satisfaction. On the other, they can't help feeling, somewhere down the line, that vibrators and even good careers and friends are not enough. Is it any surprise, then, that

they ultimately funnel the same drive, determination, organizational prowess, and even, to some extent, the same willingness to play by "the rules" into relationships which they previously funneled into educational and professional achievement? "My success came," writes the high-end career woman Nita Tucker, "when I ... began thinking of [falling in love] as a project ... I applied the same skills that had made me successful in other areas of life to finding a relationship." Is it any surprise that, conflicted as they are about men, and disenfranchised as they are in many cases by their lack of romantic experience, young women revert nervously to the "hard-to-get" (but easy-to-follow) ploys of their great-grandmothers?

As women reassess their roles in society; as both sexes work together more and more and trust each other less and less; as everyone brings careerish determination to sentimental accident, there is a space—nay, a cry—for intelligent reappraisals of romantic love. What we have instead is fearful repetition of romantic cliché—tired and retired romantic cliché. The great minds of our moment steer clear of the great questions. Once upon a time it was Ovid and Montaigne, Stendhal and Balzac, Hazlitt and Emerson, who tried their hands at treatises about how to love. Now it's aging, self-congratulatory frat boys like Cerstman, Pizzo, and Seldes; failed farmhands like Lyndon McGill; and peevish spice girls like Nailah Shami who hold the floor and set the tone of the discussion. The dearth of commanding commentary gives audience to idiots.

Turn from them back to the ancients. Love, Ovid wrote, "is no assignment for cowards." Safe sex, fine; but safe *love* is impossible. Love that manifests itself in considerate questions designed to rule out mates with family problems (as we find in *The Real Rules*)—no. Love as "project," as a kind of postdoc undertaken after our real goals have been attained—no. Let us allow boldness to prevail where rules make cowards of us all. Let us allow magic to reign where we find it, lest we color the world gray. ▀



THE PUZZLER

by EMILY COX and HENRY RATHVON

Book Reviews

The library of a puzzle writer is apt to contain some unusual volumes. The reviews below, in which we examine ten of our hardest-to-find books, also happen to make up the clues to this month's puzzle. These clues are strung together in random order, except that all the Acrosses precede the Downs. Puzzling out the answers' locations is your job. Answers include twelve capitalized words.

Last month's Puzzler solution is on page 145.

CLUES

Playing the Toady: By Dr. J. Court study with about as much style as a slab of pine. A sampling of gossip in sports.

Legs: One weird new novel by William Kennedy, set in Mobile. Insane and mawkish family history about Alabama town full of Irish people irritated about a "leg."

Big Chief: Le Carre's tailor has to bust Mafia boss and crooked cop. A convincing depiction of the actual lives in a royal domain, according to oral testimony.

Fat Country: Amy Tan in a dither about love for the physical body. Consuming a mixture of gin and tea, popular music composer accidentally wings her sister who works as a thread-spinner. Nothing takes place after material goes on and on in a gabby fashion.

Beasts Without: Kay Ryan's debut, it evokes a "language gym." Like vegetables, unfortunately, and like all seasons' beginnings, this poem degenerates.

Devil Hunting: Potter's origin, by Harry's creator. While the boy is a tennis player, sorcerer's earliest appearances and protectors get brought back in meandering plot. For older boys only.

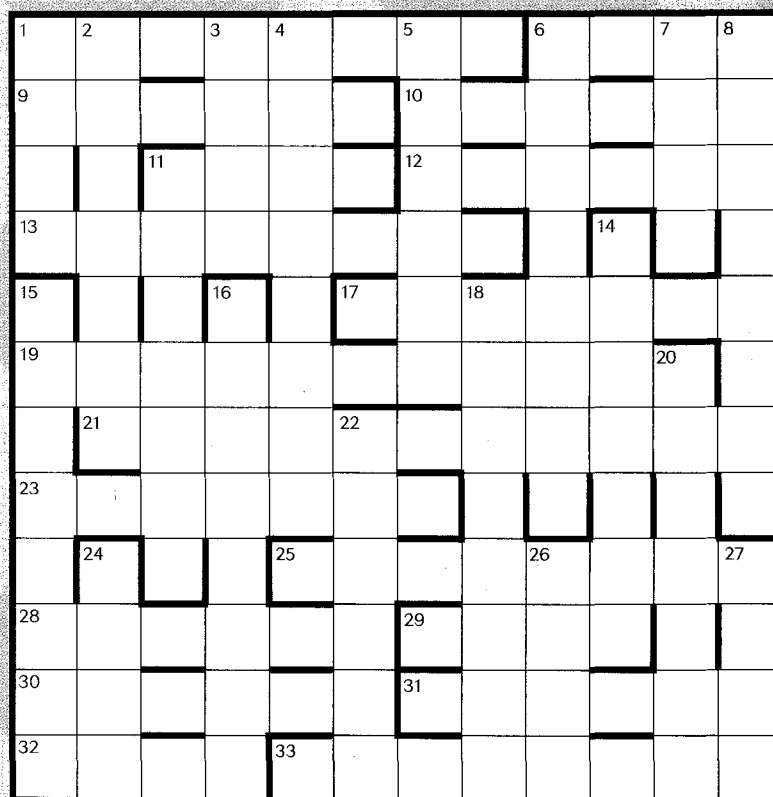
Guns for the Retrospective Hunter: Illustrations by Emily I. Small. Picture-maker shot game between island and river in the Balkans.

Felony One: New treatment of *Carrie* in more salacious adult edition, eliciting repugnance. To understand King in the present chilling times, get drunk.

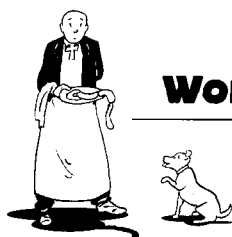
Rest Home for the O'Haras: A traitor comes back to watch Scarlett's ultimate demise. With violence.

Endless Mile: In tale Agee fabricated, about fifty-one of the Romans left a region bordering on Lebanon and Syria.

Note: The instructions above are for this month's puzzle only. It is assumed that you know how to decipher clues. For a complete introduction to clue-solving send an addressed, stamped long envelope to The Atlantic Puzzler, 77 North Washington Street, Boston, Mass. 02114.



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WORD COURT

by BARBARA WALLRAFF

S. SMITH, of Alameda, California, writes, "When I was a student teacher in a middle school, my master teacher's pet peeve was the popular use (or misuse) of *it's* as a contraction of *it has*. I see this usage daily: '*It's* been a tough day' or '*It's* been a pleasure meeting you.' It sounds wrong to me, too. Is it?"

No—at least not when *has* is used as an auxiliary verb (compare "My car needs a tune-up. *It's* trouble climbing hills" and "*It's* always had trouble climbing hills"). And you'll want to keep in mind that since *it's* can be a contraction of either *it is* or *it has*, in some contexts *it's* will be annoyingly ambiguous.

Sad to say, these days the distinction between *it's*, the contraction, and *its*, a possessive, needs defending. "My car ran out of gas and one of *its* tires went flat—*it's* completely ruined my day." Surely the reason this distinction gives people trouble is that the possessives of pronouns don't use apostrophes (*its*), whereas the possessives of nouns do (*car's*).

Where the superstition got started that *it's* is legitimately a contraction only of *it is* is unclear to me, but I suspect that the fault may lie with usage guides so concerned to draw a clear distinction between *it's* and *its* that they forget to mention that *it's* can mean *it has* as well as *it is*. And sometimes usage guides object to the overuse of contractions generally. But I've never seen one that actually forbids the use of *it's* as a contraction of *it has*. Your master teacher was being what's called overnice.

ANN HOWLAND, of Middlesex, Vermont, writes, "I wonder if anyone has ever asked you to discuss the rather unfortunate use of the word *bred*. For example, I recently read on a novel's jacket that the author had

been born and *bred* in North Carolina. I am aware that one of the meanings of this word is 'raised' or 'nurtured.' However, every time I have encountered this usage, it is within the context of describing a woman's background, never a man's, so I can't shake the initial connotation that comes to my mind: that the woman was literally *bred*, as if she were a heifer. Maybe you can shed some light on how this use of this word evolved and then perhaps conjure up a reason for its persistence."



Will you feel better to learn that the word is not only, or even primarily, applied to females? The week before I wrote this, *The Orlando Sentinel* called a male filmmaker "Brooklyn-born, Queens-bred," the *Los Angeles Times* called an all-male quintet "Los Angeles-based, Omaha-bred," and *The Village Voice* referred to a legal case as having "bred numerous law-review essays."

What's more, if you're going to reject as unseemly any word that can possibly have a whiff of the barnyard about it—well, there go *have* and *take* and *cover* and *reproduction* and *stud earrings* and heaven only knows what else. *Bred* is just a derivative of the verb *breed*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a thousand-year-old mean-

ing of this verb is "Said of a female parent: To cherish (brood) in the womb or egg; to bring (offspring) forward from the germ to the birth; to hatch (young birds) from the egg; to produce (offspring, children)." Several centuries old is the meaning "to train up to a state of physical or mental development"; the *OED* explains that this sense has been "evidently transferred" from the meaning just cited, "the young creature being viewed as a rude germ to be developed by nurture." A supporting citation from 1570 reads, "One of the best Scholars that euer S. Johns Colledge bred." A reason, then, to continue using *bred* with the meaning "brought up" or "trained" is that well-bred people have been using it that way for many generations.

RICHARD CECIL, of San Francisco, writes, "I often see the word *jell* in print, used in the context of a group's chemistry having *jelled* or a team having *jelled*. However, I am also seeing it spelled *gel*. For example, one recent Sunday evening a *Washingtonpost.com* story about an NFL game bore the headline 'Washington's Offense Finally *Jells* in the Second Half'; the next morning the headline for the same story read 'Offense *Gels* as Washington Rolls to Second Win.' Who had it right—the night shift or the Monday-morning crew?"

It's a rare Monday-morning quarterback who gets it wrong, but evidently you've found one who did. Though the two words share an etymology, *jell* is standard in figurative senses like the ones you describe.

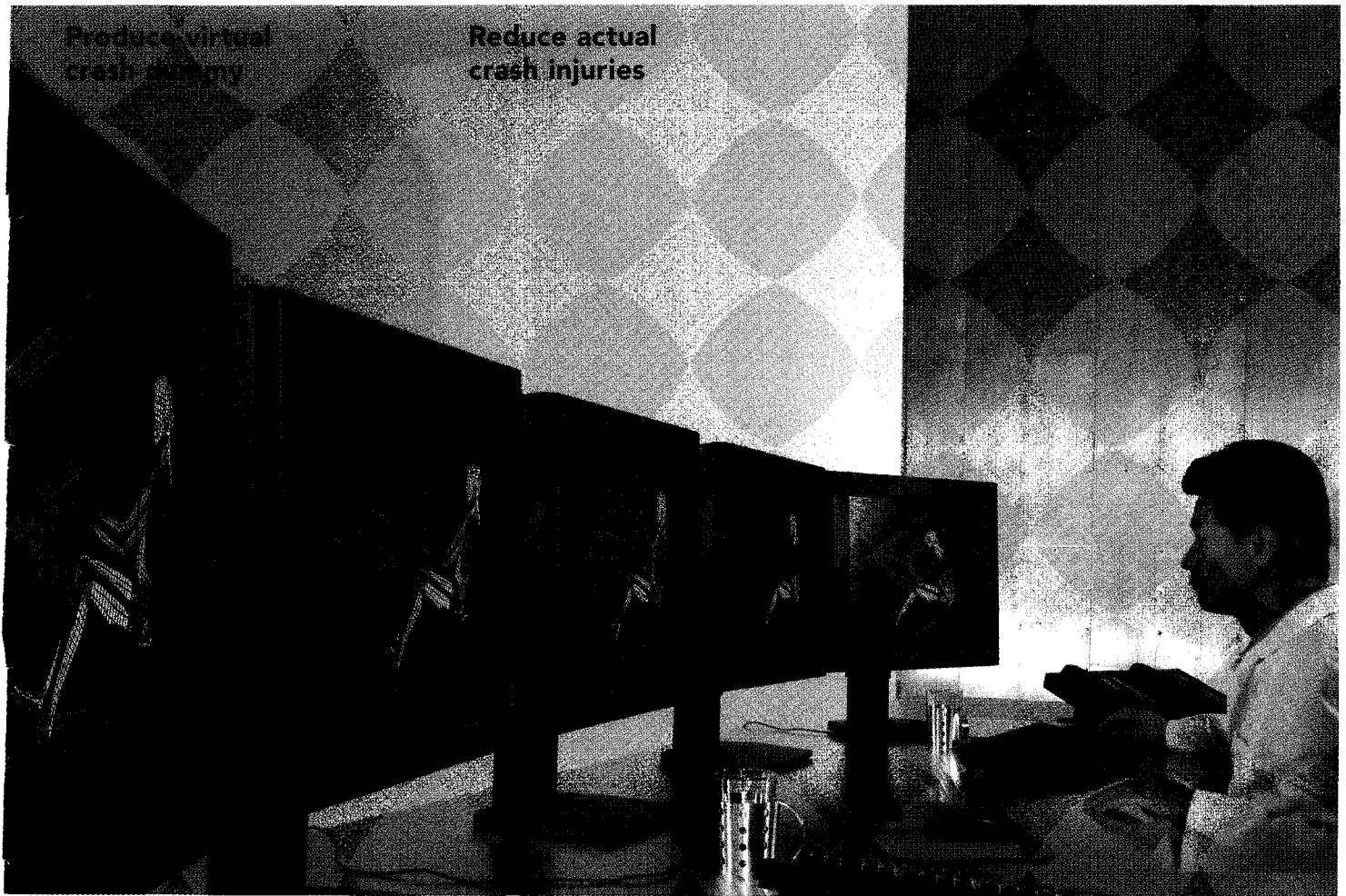
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GREG CLARKE

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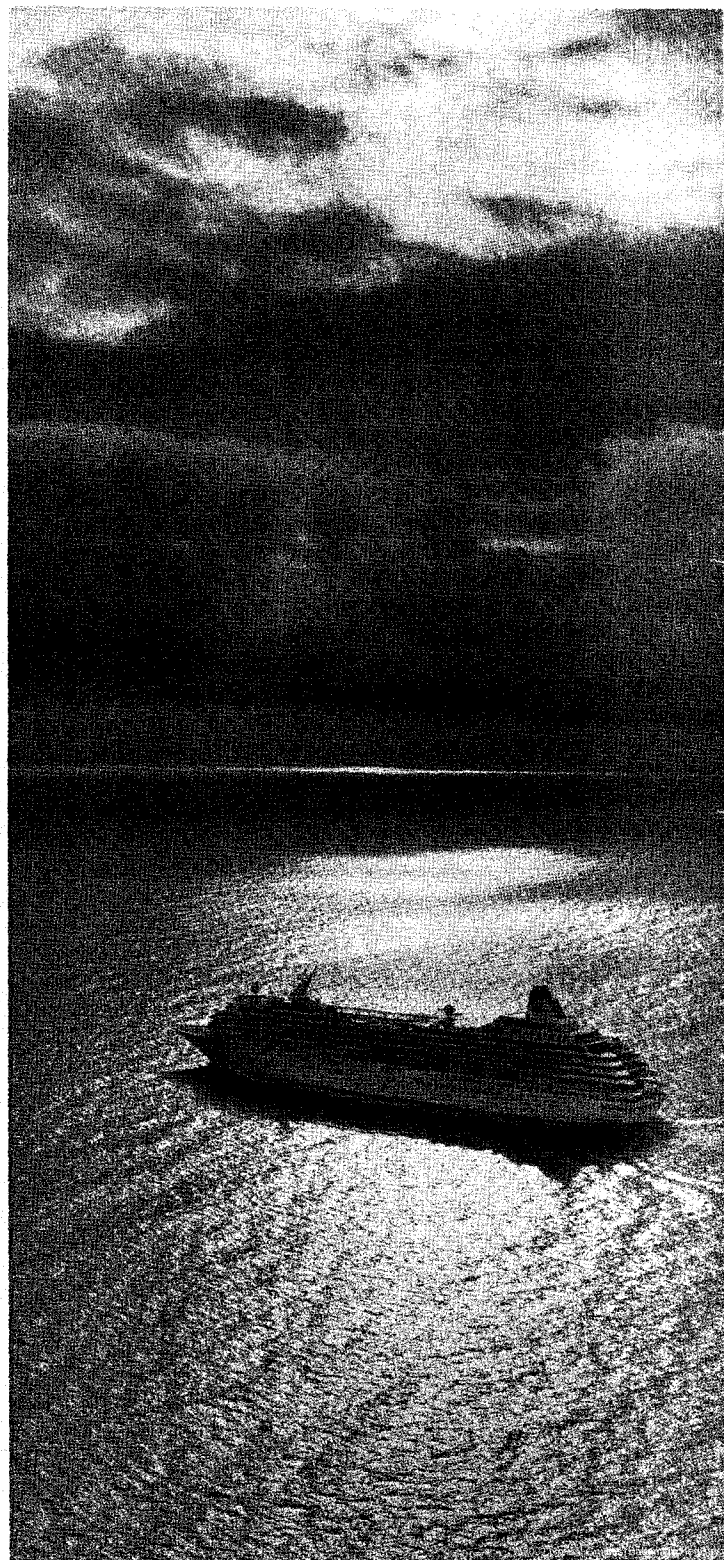
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